CHAPTER – III
BLACK FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

1.1 INTRODUCTION

When asked about why they write, these women – Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, to name a few, are articulate and moving in their replies. “I wrote *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were books I had wanted to read. No one had written them yet, so I wrote them”, says Toni Morrison (Tate 122). Audre Lorde states,

I write for myself. When I say myself, I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body, but all those fiesty incorrigible black women who insist on standing up and saying, ‘I am, and you cannot wipe me out.’ I write for those women for whom a voice has not yet existed or whose voices have been silenced. (Tate104)

A simple yet powerful statement comes from Maya Angelou : “I write because I am a black woman listening attentively to her talking people” (Evans, 4). Gloria Naylor is direct and acid. Says she “I wanted to become a writer because I felt that my presence as a black woman and my perspective as a black woman in general had been under represented in American literature” (Bradley 42). Toni Cade Bambara, in her interviews given to Beverly Guy-Sheftall (“Commitment : Toni Cade Bambara Speaks”, 1979), Kalamuya Sulaam (“Searching for the Mother-tongue : An Interview”, 1980), Kay Bonetti (“The Organiser’s Wife” : A Reading by and interview Toni Cade Bambara”, 1982), Deborah Jackson (“An Interview With Toni Cade Bambara”, 1982), Claudia Tate (“Toni Cade Bambara” in *Women Writers at Work*, 1983), and an interview with Louis Massiah (“How She Came by her Name”, 1996), clearly states her vocation as a writer, and community worker. In one of her interviews given to Louis Massiah, Bambare states :

I never thought of myself as a writer. I always thought of myself as a community person who writes and does a few other things. I always get a little antsy when people limit me as a writer. In terms of
scribbling, I’ve always been writing, so long as I could find paper – not easy during the war. (Massiah 218)

When she visited Cuba in 1973, she realised her profession of writing. She observes:

When I came back from Cuba in 1973, I began to think that writing could be a way to engage in struggle, it could be a weapon, a real instrument for transformation politics. Let me take myself a little more seriously and stop just having fun, I thought. (219)

Bambara has projected African-American feminist consciousness in her writings. A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about a woman’s life and problems, and feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. African-American feminist consciousness is an awakening that one is oppressed not because one is ignorant, nor because one is lazy, not because one is stupid, but just because one is African-American and female. African-American feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. It is an apprehension that one is a victim because one is African-American, female, black, ugly and poor.

African-American women have a unique place in American life and literature. The novelists like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, Gloria Naylor and a host of others have enabled “black women, says Alice Walker, especially those most marginalized by race, caste and class, to have their voices heard and their histories read” (Sinha 87). Black women are differentiated not only in terms of male standard and poverty but also most importantly by Euro-American women’s standard. In almost every other instance, the black woman is understood in contrast to the Euro-American white woman. As a result they are discarded, and suffer from self-scorn.

Not only Afro-American women novelists but also Afro-American feminist critics have projected Afro-American feminist consciousness in their writings, and struggled to establish a tradition that would reflect their distinct
concerns. Barbara Smith in her path-breaking essay ‘Toward a Black Feminist Criticism’ said:

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely feminist self-aggrandisement. (27)

Through her short stories, novels, essays, speeches, interviews, script writing, Bambara intends to convey her message as she declares to Claudia Tate in an interview for the book Black Women Writers at Work (1983):

I am about the empowerment and development of our sisters and of our community. That sense of caring and celebration is certainly reflected in the body of my work and has been consistently picked up by other writers, reviewers, critics, teachers, students. But as I said, I leave that hard task of analysis to the analysts. I do my work and I try not to blunder. (15)

Two things in the initiative stage helped largely Bambara to pick the profession of writing short stories. First is the profound influence of her mother, Helen Brent Henderson Cade who strongly encouraged her children to explore their creativity. Second is the “Harlem Renaissance”, a flowering of African American culture – especially literature – that reached its peak during the 1920s. Toni’s early interest in story writing flourished with her mother’s care. “She gave me permission to wonder, to dawdle, to daydream”, Bambara recalled to Tate. Having attended a number of public and private schools in New York, New Jersey, and the Southeast United States, she went to complete her graduation in 1959. 1959 saw the first publication of one of her stories, “Sweet Town” in Vendome Magazine. Most of Bambara’s early writings – short stories written between 1959 and 1970 under the name Toni Cade were collected and published. The Black Woman, an anthology, contains short stories by Bambara, who was at that time still writing under the name of Cade. According to Deck, Bambara saw the work as “a response to all the male ‘experts’ both black and white, who had been publishing articles and
conducting sociological studies on black women” (Dec. 15). Another anthology, _Tales and Stories for Black Folks_, followed in 1971. This anthology is intended to show young readers the importance and development of story telling in black culture. In 1972, she published her fifteen stories that were written during the period from 1959 to 1970, under the title _Gorilla, My Love : Short Stories_. Bambara told Tate in an interview published in _Black Women Writers at Work_ that when her agent suggested she assembled some old stories for a book, she thought “Aha, I’ll get the old kid stuff out and see if I can’t clear some space to get into something else” (Tate 24). Nevertheless, _Gorilla, My Love_ remains her most widely read collection.

Deck noted that after the publication of her first collection, “major events took place in Toni Cade Bambara’s life which were to have an effect on her writing” (Deck 17). Bambara travelled to Cuba in 1973 where she met with women’s organizations and women workers and was inspired to think further about the connection between writing and social activism, as well as about possibilities for women in the United States. Another important event was her visit to Vietnam in 1975 as a guest of the Women’s Union, a visit that moved her more deeply into community organizing. Upon returning to the United States, Bambara moved to the South, where she became a founding member of the Southern Collective of African-American Writers. Her travels and her involvement with community groups like the collective influenced the themes and settings of _The Sea Birds Are Still Alive_ (1977), her second collection of short stories. These stories take place in diverse geographical areas, and they center chiefly around communities instead of individuals. With both collections, critics noted Bambara’s skill in the genre, and many praised the musical nature of language and dialogue in her stories.

After her death from cancer in December, 1995, Karma, her daughter, and friend and editor, Toni Morrison, pledged to collect Bambara’s previously unpublished work. The result of that pledge, _Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions : Fiction, Essays, and Conversations_, edited and prefaced by Morrison, is Bambara’s first book since the early 1980s. The anthology includes many selections which have never before appeared in print. The
compilation of six stories, five essays, and an interview with the author showcases Bambara’s extraordinary range as a writer, film critic, activist, and cultural worker. All of the stories in the collection are about relationships, responsibility, and community.

1.2.1 Toni Cade Bambara’s Creed of Writing:

It is said that every great writer has his/her own principles of writing. Bambara is not exception to this. Before looking into her tenets of writing, let us see her contribution to short stories. In 1959, Bambara published her first short story “Sweet Town” in Vendome Magazine. Gorilla, My Love (1972), the first collection of Bambara’s short stories, contains fifteen short stories. The Sea Birds Are Still Alive (1977), is a second collection, containing ten stories. The rest of the stories are published in Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions (1996), after her death, by Toni Morrison. A careful study of those stories reveals two things: Barbara’s creed of writing, and her point of view. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see her creed of writing.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the short story as a genre passed through various stages of evolution. The countries like France, Germany and Russia produced short-stories, focusing on socio-realistic portrayals of characters. America, too, produced great short story writers like Irving, Poe and Hawthorne to name a few. A number of regional writers came forward and depicted pastoral vignettes in fiction. The pastoral vignettes were woven into the stories with a mixture of psychological subtlety and humour. In such a literary climate were heard the hitherto repressed voices of various ethnic writers. Powerful and authentic among these were the voices of Black writers who formed “the Harlem Renaissance”. Prior to the coming of Bambara as a short-story writer, there were a number of writers such as Zora Neale, Hurson, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hulings, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry, Willard Motley and a host of others who rose in unison to create a literary awareness. Bambara launched her career as a short story writer. She published her first short story “Sweet Town” in 1959, and “Mississippi Ham Rider” in 1960. Many of the characters in these stories speak in black dialect. In her
interview given to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Bambara makes categorically clear her choice of writing short stories. Although short story writing does not bring her any monetary gain, she still prefers short story to any other form. This deliberate choice is made clear when she answers to Beverly Guy-Sheftall:

It’s deliberate, coincidental, accidental and regretful. Regretful, commercially. That is to say, it is financially stupid to be a short story writer and to spend two years putting together eight or ten stories and receiving maybe half the amount of money you would had you taken one of those short stories and produced a novel. The publishing companies, reviewers, critics, are all geared to promoting and pushing the novel rather than any other form. (6)

Having talked about the monetary gain of short story, Bambara talked of preference of short story to any other form of literature. Bambara says:

I prefer the short story genre because it’s quick, it makes a modest appeal for attention, it can creep up on you on your blind side. The reader comes to the short story with a mind-set different than that with which he approaches the big book, and a different set of controls operating which is why I think the short story is far more effective in terms of teaching us lessons. (6)

She further states:

Temperamentally, I move toward the short story because I’m a sprinter rather than a long-distance runner. I cannot sustain characters over a long period of time. Walking around, frying eggs, being a mother, shopping – I cannot have those characters living in my house with me for more than a couple of weeks. (6)

Bambare speaks the same thing with stress. As she observes:

I prefer the short story as a reader, as well, because it does what it does in a hurry. For the writer and the reader make instructive demands in terms of language precision. It deals with economy, gets it said, and gets out of the way. As a teacher, I also prefer the short story for
all the reasons given. And yes, I consider myself primarily a short story writer. (6)

Bambara considers herself to be short story writer. Not only she expresses her preference for short story but she also expresses about the size of the short story. She did not either like or appreciate the longer stories. She is of the opinion that a short story should be short only. As she observes:

To my mind, the six page short story is the gem. If it takes more than six pages to say it, something is the matter. So I’m not too pleased in that respect with the new collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, most of those stories are too sprawling and hairy for my taste, although I’m very pleased, feel perfectly fine about them as pieces. But as stories they are too damn long and dense. (7)

In several interviews and in an essay (“What It Is I Think I’m Doing Anyhow”), Bambara emphasizes her preference for the short story as both a convenient tool for use in the classroom and in lecture engagements (she refers to them as “portable”), and as an easier art form to produce than the novel. The brevity, and its “modest appeal for attention”, is what she finds most effective about the short story, but in Bambara’s own figurative style of explaining it, she says, “Temperamentally, I move toward the short story because I’m a sprinter rather than a long-distance runner” (Deck 19).

When Bambara was asked a question on her autobiographical writing, she answered:

I usually read my “Sort of Preface” from *Gorilla, My Love*, which states my case on autobiographical writing; namely, I don’t do it ... except, of course, that I do; we all do. That is, whomsoever we may conjure up or remember or imagine to get a story down, we’re telling our own tale just as surely as a client on the analyst’s couch, just as surely as a pilgrim on the way to Canterbury, just as surely as the preacher who selects a particular text for the sermon, then departs from it, pulling Miz Mary right out of the pew and clear out of her shouting shoes. (Tate 22-23)
1.2.2 Next point after her preference to short story writing is her deliberation of writing. Bambara says that she is a “message writer”, which makes many people, including some literary critics, nervous. Regarding her perspective of writing, she tells Claudia Tate:

As black and woman in a society systematically orchestrated to oppress each and both, we have a very particularly vantage point, and therefore, have a special contribution to make to the collective intelligence, to the literatures of this historical moment. I’m clumsy and incoherent when it comes to defining that perspective in specific and concrete terms, worse at assessing the value of my own particular pitch and voice in the overall chorus. I leave that to our critics, to our teachers and students of literature. I am a nationalist; I am a feminist, at least that. That’s clear, I’m sure, in the work. My story “Medley” could not have been written by a brother, nor could “A Tender Man” have been written by a white woman. Those two stories are very much cut on the bias, so to speak, by a seam-stress on the inside of the cloth. I am about the empowerment and development of our sisters and of our community. That sense of caring and celebration is certainly reflected in the body of my work and has been consistently picked up by other writers, reviewers, critics, teachers, students. (Tate 14-15)

Bambara takes the problems of the blacks in her writings. To her, writing is one of the ways:

I participate in struggle-one of the ways I help to keep vibrant and resilient that vision that has kept the family going on. Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, the attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of vices that argues that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways I practise the commitment to explore bodies of knowledge for the usable wisdoms they yield. (Sternberg 154)

To convey the message, she wrote short stories. As regards to the significance of short stories in life and literature, she observes:
Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge ___ the story teller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do; to produce stories that save our lives. (Evans 41)

As this quote shows, Bambara is a writer of responsibility and hope, a writer who sees violence, injustice, and oppression, but who believes in the ability of human beings to transform themselves and their situations. She also writes:

I despair at our failure to wrest power from those who abuse it; our reluctance to reclaim our old powers lying dormant with neglect; our hesitancy to create power in areas where it never before existed, and I’m euphoric because everything in our history, our spirit, our daily genius—suggests we do it. (“Salvation” 46)

Bambara was one of the first writers to approach the search for black identity from a feminist perspective. In her fiction, as in the anthologies she has edited, Bambara explores the world of black women, encouraging them to defeat sexism and social injustice through the exertion of their own powerful wills within a larger community.

1.2.3 Having seen Bambara’s creed of writing short stories and deliberation of writing, let us see her craftsmanship. Bambara’s short stories were the early works which brought her to the attention of reviewers, critics, interviewers and reading public at large. Her method of narration, deep insights into the characters and use of English dialect has invited a number of critics. Speaking on her craft of writing, she tells Beverly Guy-Sheftall: “In terms of craft, I don’t have the kinds of skills yet that it takes to stay with a large panorama of folks and issues and landscapes and moods. That requires a set of skills that I don’t know anything about yet, but I’m learning” (6).

Bambara’s interviews with Claudia Tate and Guy-Sheftall throw much of light on her composition of short stories and technique being used in those
stories. According to Bambara, there are certain periods required for the composition of stories. Regarding the first period, she says:

It depends on how much time you have. There are periods in my life when I know that I will not be able to get to the desk until summer, until months later, in which case I walk around composing while washing dishes and may jot down little definitive notes on pieces of paper which I stick under the phone, in the mirror, and all over the house. At other times, a story mobilizes itself around a single line you’ve heard that resonates. There’s a truth there, something usable. Sometimes a story revolves around a character that I’m interested in. (7)

Regarding the second period of writing short stories, she tells Guy-Sheftall:

There are other times when a story is absolutely clear in the head. All of it may not be clear – who’s going to say what and where it’s taking place or what year it is – but the story frequently comes together at one moment in the head. At other times, stories like any other kind of writing anything - freshman compositions, press releases, or whatever - has experienced this, that frequently writing is an act of discovery. .. (7)

The third stage of writing short story is automatic writing. What Bambara calls it is inspiration. She tells Guy-Sheftall:

There are times when you have to put aside what you intended to write, what got you to the desk in the first place, and just go with the story that is coming out of you, which may or may not have anything to do with what you planned at all. (7)

What Bambara described about the process of writing short stories in detail to Guy-Sheftall is the same but in nutshell to Claudia Tate when Tate wanted to know her process of writing short stories. Bambara tells Tate:

There’s no particular routine to my writing, nor have any two stories come to me the same way. I’m usually working on five or six things at a time; that is, I scribble a lot in bits and pieces and generally pin them together with a working title. The actual sit down work is still weird to
me. I babble along heading! think in one direction, only to discover myself tagged in another, or sometimes I’m absolutely snatched into an alley. I write in longhand or what kin and friends call deranged hieroglyphics.... (Tate 30-31)

1.2.4 Having seen her process of writing short stories let us see her method of narration. While describing her process of writing to Tate, Bambara observes:

... I didn’t want merely a witness or a camera eye. Omniscient author never has attracted me; he or she presumes too much. First person was out because I’m interested in a group of people. Narrator as part-time participant was rejected, too. Finally, I found a place to sit, to stand, and a way to be – the narrator as medium through whom the people unfold the stories, and the town telling as much of its story as can be told in the space of one book.

This business of narrating is a serious matter. Often times I’ve been asked, “Where’s your narrator?” or told, “Your narrator is always so unobtrusive unless the story is first person.’ Most of the time it seems that way because the narrator speaks the same code and genuinely cares for the people, so there’s no distance. That suits my temperament. I am not comfortable conjuring up the folks and then shoving them around like pawns. I conjured them up in order to listen to them. I brought Virginia out, for example, the sister in “The Organizer’s Wife”, because I wanted to know what those quiet-type sisters sound like on the inside. I was always the quiet, country students that slipped my grasp in the classroom. When I get back to teaching, I want to be able to service them better than I have, so I have to get the narrator out of the way. One way to do that is to have the narrator be a friend, be trustworthy. (Tate 32)

Bambara was particular about the use of dialect in her short stories and novels. What Mary Helen Washington has said of black women writers is true of Bambara: “Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, ... (and) for
purpose of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own space” (43).

This expresses their inner need to create an original style for their original experiences. This need leads them to experiment with various forms of language. Feminist theorists attempt to reclaim and redefine women through restructuring language. Being a ‘feminist’, Bambare speaks to Beverly Guy-Sheftall about her dialect:

.... You see, one of the reasons that it seems that the author is not there has to do with language. It has to do with the whole tradition of dialect. In the old days, writers might have their characters talking dialect or slang but the narrator, that is to say, the author, maintained a distance and a “superiority” by speaking a more premiumed language. I tend to speak on the same level as my characters, so it seems as though I am not there, because possibly, you are looking for mother voice. (8-9)

Bambara’s prose is poetic, and often confrontation, reflecting her honesty, passion, and commitment to issues of race, gender and community. Her feminist attitude is fierce but her language is poetic. It has a worldly and sometimes satiric purpose. She acts against the myths that dignify black women by taking away their initiative. Bambara’s emotional language of her characters is one of the most distinctive qualities of her writing. A Newsweek reviewer explains “In terms of plot, Bambara tends to avoid linear development in favour of presenting situations that build like improvisations of a melody” (Internet).

Bambara made use of English that was in practice in the 1970s. the label applied in the 1970s to a dialect of English widely learned at home and spoken by African Americans was “Vernacular Black English” or VBE. It is a true dialect, governed by its own set of rules for syntax, pronunciation, and grammar. Beginning in the 1970s, educators studying vernacular Black English began to discuss and honour it as a true language, rather than rejecting it as simply “bad grammar” or “sloppy pronunciation”. The term in
the 1960s had been “Nonstandard Negro English.” African American students began to learn both the “standard English and VBE.”

Arguments about Black English have continued since the 1970s. In the 1980s, the term “African American Vernacular English” (AAVE) replaced VBE. In the 1990s, the term “Ebonics” was created to describe what some consider a separate African language, not related to English, spoken by African Americans.

Bambare made use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in stories such as “The Lesson” (1972). Sylvia, the narrator in the story ‘The Lesson”, speaks and narrates in African American Vernacular English. This is an appropriate dialect for Sylvia, who lives in a New York ghetto, is a working-class black child about twelve years old, and has a strong feminist attitude. AAVE is also a dialect that Bambara herself would have learned growing up during the 1940s and 1950s in New York City’s Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant Communities. AAVE has certain following characteristics:

1. AAVE adds realism and humour to Sylvia’s narrative.
2. Bambara uses language in her short stories to evoke humour and multiple meanings. The narrators use ambiguous words, phrases and references to multiply meanings.
3. The dialect reflects Bambara’s pride in her ethnic heritage.
4. AAVE fits the story’s themes, one of which is that the black children in the story need to learn about the world outside their ghetto and another that wealth is unequally and unfairly distributed in American society. In “the Lesson” most of the have-not children in need of education speak AAVE.
5. This dialect emphasizes the children’s distance from mainstream white bourgeois culture and economic power.
6. Bambara also celebrates AAVE as a vehicle for conveying black experience : Sylvia uses AAVE to express her self-confidence assertiveness, and creativity as a young black woman.

Bambara’s fiction reflects the perspective of her black contemporaries. African-Americans became interested in the movements that emphasized Black Power, Black Pride, and Black Nationalism. Sylvia Wallace Holton analyses the work of black writers like Amiri Baraka who experimented with
AAVE in fiction. “Committed to writing for a black rather than a white audience, Baraka refuses to be bound by the rules of ‘white’ literature and language. Instead, he expresses himself in a normative but distinctive black speech” (186). Bambara carries on this tradition of cultural nationalism in her fiction and essays. A lot of research has been carried out by Bambara Hill Hudson, Denise Troutman, Richard O. Lewis and a host of others in respect of the use of African American Vernacular English.

In “Black English”, Bambara explains the political reasons for her interest in the language of African Americans, especially as it is used informally, on the street. Bambara observes: “To resist acculturation, you hang on to language, because it is the reflection of a people, of a core of ideas and beliefs and values and literature and lore” (Internet 18). Bambara introduces an entire population, men, women, and children, all engaged in playing the Dozens and other forms of word play. The stories of Bambara are remarkable for portrayal of black life and faithful reproduction of black dialect. Critics like Nancy Hargrove (*The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. I, Fall, 1983), Klaus Ensslen (Hazel’s narrative in “*Gorilla, My Love*”) appreciated Bambara’s ear for the urban African American speech of her female protagonists/narrators— a voice that only infrequently had been captured so accurately.

1.2.5 Drawing character-sketch is another important and remarkable feature of her short story. The character or the protagonist is first and foremost a symbolic representation of the person who is experiencing the story while reading, listening or watching. In portraying black life, Bambara presents a wide range of black characters, and she uses as settings Brooklyn, Harlem, or unnamed black sections of New York City, except for three stories which take place in rural areas. Bambara’s characters, like those in *Gorilla, My Love*, are rarely at odds with these settings. They move through their immediate neighbourhoods comfortably familiar with the people and with each building, street lamp, and fire hydrant they pass. Each character in *Gorilla, My Love*, exudes a streetwise sophistication, confidence in “mother wit” that helps him or hers intimidate immediate rivals.
Bambara’s special gift as a writer of fiction is her ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view. The characters of whom she writes most often and with the greatest tenderness and subtle invention are adolescents and old people, mostly female. Bambara’s world of fiction is full of varieties of people. First, we have many narrators or central characters of her stories who are children. Bambara calls her children “tough little compassionate kids” (231) who live in a world where grown-ups often carelessly violate the contracts they have made with them. Bambara believes that for the most part U.S. society and especially the educational system cripples Black children, by trying to force them into conformity, by telling them lies, by creating architectural forms such as low-income, high-rises that break up their communities. But in her stories she shows counter forces at work, such as individuals who treat children with respect, children who see through the hypocrisy around them, and the Pan-African free schools of the Black community which begin with the premise that children are responsible, competent, and principled, and where teachers encourage students to raise questions, critique everything they read and see, take responsibility for themselves and their world. Secondly, Bambara encounters all types of women – big mouthed women, beautiful women, independent women, dependent women etc. Older black women are grandmothers to everyone. Thirdly, there are men and women who are spiritual healers, and who assist the people in their recovery from dealing with racism and economic exploitation.

Most of the characters of Bambara are influenced by the three factors, namely, where they are from, which includes their financial status; how they are raised; and the character of the people that have had the most influence on their lives. Sylvia, in Bambara’s “The Lesson” is very much influenced by all these factors. Sylvia’s living in the slums and being poor makes her defensive and judgemental. Her parents not being around much leaves her without the attention and discipline that children need to develop to their fullest. Lastly, her friends and Miss Moore also have a great influence on how Sylvia thinks and acts, and lead Sylvia to be observant but also angry and stubborn.
Bambara created a galaxy of characters. Some of the popular and memorable characters are – Hazel, Thunderbuns, Baby Jason Vale, Big Brood Vale, Daddy Vale, Granddaddy Vale, Hunca Bubba, Mama Vale, Kit, Ollie, Peaches, Maggie, Sylvia, Inez, Miss Candy, Pasty, Ma Drew, Jewel Awoke, Naomi, Rae Ann, Virginia, Mr. Rider, Punjab, Miss Moore, and a number of others. Like Toni Morrison, Bambara created young girls with irrepressible energy; Sula and Claudia can be compared to Bambara’s Hazel and Sylvia. Through these characters, Bambara expresses the fragility, the pain, and occasionally the promise of the experience of growing up, of coming to terms with a world that is hostile, chaotic, and violent. The young protagonists undergo such elements as disillusionment, loss, loneliness as well as unselfishness, love and endurance. To conclude with the words of Martha M. Vertreace:

Her female characters become as strong as they do, not because of some inherent “eternal feminine” quality granted at conception, but rather because of the lessons women learn from communal interaction. Identity is achieved, not bestowed. Bambara’s short stories focus on such learning. Very careful to present situations in a highly orchestrated manner; Bambara describes the difficulties that her characters must overcome. (45)

1.2.6 Another feature of her craft of writing is “point of view”. The term “point of view” describes the way an author presents a story to readers. It establishes who the narrator is – that is, who is telling the story. In Gorilla, My Love, the point of view is labelled “first person” which means that the story is told by one character within the story, Hazel, who describes the events as she experiences them. The reader hears the story, not as a detached observer, but as a participant and an ally, listening to a frustrated child who is practically in tense.

1.2.7 Black women writers, including feminists had the task of giving back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood etc. Equal important task was to have black tradition. Women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and
Toni Cade Bambara pleaded for not only black language but also black tradition. Mary Helen Washington writes in her introduction to Midnight Birds:

Black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and, even though they can claim a rightful place in the Afro-American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that, for purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space. (243)

Many black women writers and black feminists who acknowledge the influence of male as well as female literary foreparents, underscore the problematics of a separate black female literary tradition. Bambara, for example, says:

Women are less likely to skirt the feeling place, to finesse with language, to camouflage emotions. But a lot of male writers knock that argument out ... one of the crucial differences that strikes me immediately among poets, dramatists, novelists, story tellers is in the handling of children. I can’t nail it down, but the attachment to children and to two-plus-two reality is simply stronger in women’s writings; but there are exceptions. And finally, there isn’t nearly as large a bulk of gynocentric writing as there is phallic-obsessive writings. I’d love to read/ hear a really good discussion of just this issue by someone who’s at home with close textual reading – cups, bowls, and other motifs in women’s writings. We’ve only just begun ... to fashion a woman’s vocabulary to deal with the “silences” of our lives. (Bell 243)

1.3.1 *Gorilla, My Love*: Introduction

*Gorilla, My Love*, magnum opus of Bambara, was published in 1972 and since 1972 the volume has never been out of print. The volume contains fifteen short stories. These stories, before comprising them in one collection, appear in different magazines and anthologies. “Sweet Town”, the first short
story, was published in *Vendome* magazine in January, 1959. “Mississippi Ham Rider”, second short story, was published in the Summer, 1960 *Massachusetts Review*. The stories that she wrote from 1965 to 1969 were published in journals and magazines such as *The Liberator, Prairie, Schooner* and *Red Book*. The anthology, *The Black Woman*, which contains short stories, was published in 1970. Another anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, followed in 1971. The anthology contains the popular story, “Raymond’s Run”. Most of Bambara’s early writings were short stories written between 1959 and 1970 under the name Toni Cade and were collected in her next work, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972). In her interviews with Claudia Tate (1983) and Louis Massiah, Bambre speaks about her old stories for a collection. As she observes:

One of my good girlfriends in those days was Hattie Gossett. In those days we were all piecing, a living together. Hattie said, “Hey, let me be your agent.’ She told me about a woman up Random House named Toni Morrison who was very interested in my work. I said, “Oh, yeah?” She said, “put together a book and I’ll sell it.” So I pulled out a bunch of stuff from under the mattress, from the bottom drawer, the trunks, and I spread all this stuff around and I thought, Ooh, a collection. I thought I would put together stories that show my different voices. It looked good, but it looked like ten people wrote this thing. I went to the library and read a bunch of collections and noticed that the voice was consistent, but it was a boring and monotonous voice. Oh, your voice is supposed to be consistent in a collection, I figured. Then I pulled out a lot of stories that had a young protagonist-narrator because that voice is kind of consistent – a young, tough, compassionate girl. Then I changed my mind because the salesmen at the publishing-house will think my book is a juvenile book for a juvenile market only. So I put some adult stuff in. (231-32)

*Gorilla, My Love*, the most widely read collection, contains fifteen short stories:

1. My Man Bovanne
2. *Gorilla, My Love*
In the fifteen stories that compose *Gorilla, My Love*, all the main characters are female, thirteen of them are first person narrators, and ten of them are young, either teenagers or children. In these fifteen stories, written in a style at once ineffable and immediate recognizable, Bambara gives us compelling portraits of a wide range of unforgettable characters, from sassy to cunning old men in scenes shifting between uptown New York and rural North Caroline. Eight of the fifteen stories in the collection centre on young children and adolescents as they move through their neighbourhood learning about themselves while in the process of responding to their environment.

The hallmark of all of Bambara’s fiction is her preference for settings outside of the home. The sidewalk, a movie house, a park or athlete field, a local bar, and a community centre are some of the locations that recur in Bambara’s fiction. Bambara’s characters are rarely at odds with their geographical environment, especially those described in the stories in *Gorilla, My Love*. The move through their immediate neighbourhood comfortably familiar with the people and each building, street lamp, and fire hydrant they pass. Each of the characters in *Gorilla, My Love*, exudes a street-wise sophistication, a confidence in “mother wit”, that helps him or her to intimidate immediate rivals. A young girl suffers her first betrayal. A widow flirts with an elderly blind man against the wishes of her grown up children. A neighbourhood teaches a white social worker a lesson in responsibility. And there is more.

Sharing the world of Bambara’s straight up fiction is a stunning experience.
1.3.2 *Gorilla, My Love* was first published in the November 1971 issue of *Redbook Magazine* with the title “I Ain’t Playin, I’m Hurtin.” A year later, it became the title story in Bambara’s first short story collection.

Bambara makes use of opt titles for her stories. The titles are suggestive and sometimes ironical. The titles act like the keys to the hidden mystery of the stories. That is why so much importance is given to the titles. *Gorilla, My Love* is such an example. Critics like Mary Comfort, Ruth Elizabeth Burks and Klaus Ensslen have approached the title, *Gorilla, My Love* differently. According to Ensslen (“Toni Cade Bambara: *Gorilla, My Love*” 1993), the title chosen for the book derives from the title of a film which, symptomatically enough, the protagonist narrator Hazel never gets to see – signalling a delusive promise of the media industry as part of the dominant culture, and implicitly also a gap in the language offered the child/teenager by the adult world. According to Mary Comfort (“Liberating Figures in Toni Cade Bambara’s *Gorilla, My Love*” 1998), the title *Gorilla, My Love* is probably figurative. A crucial clue is found in a major incongruity: Hazel in the title story complains when she finds that a film called *Gorilla, My Love* is “clearly not about no gorilla” (15). When she insists on honesty – or expresses appreciation for the filmmaker’s pun – Hazel sets a protestor’s example for readers. Finding that the collection is similarly devoid of gorillas, readers might consider the rhetorical possibilities of that incongruity.

Ruth Elizabeth Burks (“From Baptism to Resurrection” 1998) suggests a metaphorical reading if “Bambara wants us to see all males as gorillas, which the incongruousness of this volume’s title suggests” (Burks, 52). The title also signifies on “Common European allegations of the propensity of African women to prefer the company of male apes” (Gates, 109). It may be that Bambara recalls that allegation to dismantle the stereotype, since some women in some stories appear to be frightened by the posturing and aggressiveness of Manny and Punjab. If these men are signifying, posing as gorillas to show that they are gorillas, however, the similarly-camouflaged women probably do, indeed, love them. Thus, it is also possible that she wants us to see both male and female characters as gorillas.
1.3.3 Having seen the significance of the title, let us see how the critics have approached and analyzed the story. One of the readings is that “Gorilla, My Love” is the story of Hazel. It is narrated by Hazel, a young girl who has been consistently disappointed by the unkempt promises made by adults. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see in detail the strong-willed and lovable character of Hazel.

As *Gorilla, My Love* opens, a first-person narrator says, “That was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name” (GML 13). Her first-person narrator speaks conversationally and authentically:

So Hunca Bubba in the back with the pecans and Baby Jason, and he is in love ... there’s a movie house ... which I ax ab out. Cause I am a movie freak from way back, even though it do get me in trouble sometime. (GML 14)

The narrator is a young person, but not until the story is nearly over is it revealed that she is a girl, and that her name is Hazel. In the opening scene, Hazel is riding in a car with her Granddaddy Vale, her Hunca Bubba (Uncle Bubba) and her younger brother, Baby Jason. They have been on a trip South to bring pecans back home. Granddaddy Vale is driving, Hazel is navigating from the front seat and therefore is called “Scout” during the trip, and Hunca Bubba and Baby Jason are sitting in the back with the buckets of dusty pecans. Hunca Bubba, who has decided that it is time he started using his given name, Jefferson Winston Vale, is in love, and will not stop talking about the woman he loves. He has a photo of her, and the movie theatre in the photo’s background catches Hazel’s attention because she is “a movie freak from way back” (14).

In the next couple of pages, we are narrated that Hazel, Baby Jason, and their brother Big Braad go to the movies on Easter Sunday. Apparently, they go to the movies quite frequently; they know all of the theatres within walking distance of their home in northern New York City, and what each is showing. They have already seen all of the Three Stooges films. The Washington Theatre on Amsterdam Avenue is advertising a film called *Gorilla, My Love*, and they decide to see that. They buy bags of potato chips
and settle in. However, when the movie starts it is not *Gorilla, My Love*, but *King of Kings*, a movie about the life of Jesus.

The children go wild, “Yellin, booin, stom pin, and carrying on”(15) until Thunderbuns, the sternest of the theatre matrons, comes to silence them. Hazil watches quietly for a while, and realizes that the Jesus portrayed in the movie is so passive that he could never hold his own in Hazel’s loud and combative family. The last straw for Hazel comes when *King of Kings* is over and a Bugs Bunny cartoon begins – one that they have already seen. Angrily, Hazel storms off to see the manager and get their money back. The manager treats her condescendingly, as adults sometimes do to children, and refuses to give a refund. Hazel leaves the office, taking the matches from the manager’s desk, and sets a fire in the lobby. The theatre is forced to close for a week.

When Hazel’s Daddy learns what she has done, he takes off his belt to punish her. But Hazel tells her side of the story, and argues, “If you say *Gorilla, My Love*, you suppose to mean it” (17). She reminds her parents that she has been raised to trust and to be trustworthy, and Daddy puts his belt back on without using it.

Hunca Bubba’s announcement about his upcoming marriage and name change seems to Hazel another example of adults being unreliable. Just as the theatre did not show the movie it promised to show, Hunca Bubba has broken a promise. Hazel reminds him tearfully that when she was a very young girl he stayed with her for two days while her parents were caught in a snow storm. He told her then that she was ‘the cutest thing that ever walked the earth” (19) and that when she grew up he would marry her. Now he intends to marry someone else. Granddaddy and Hunca Bubba laugh and point out that he had only been teasing, but Hazel will not be consoled. She cries and cries, knowing for certain that children “must stick together or be forever lost” (20) because grown-ups cannot be trusted.

**1.3.4** The plot of the story not only unfolds the character of Hazel who is a typical combination of strength and weakness, of courage and fear, of adult and child but also the two important leading themes of the story— the theme of betrayal and the theme of childhood and adulthood. Through the character,
Hazel, Bambara expounds her theme of betrayal and childhood and adulthood. Hazel comes to believe that adults, who should have children’s best interests at heart, can not in fact be trusted to tell the truth where children are concerned. In the middle section of the story, which comes first chronologically, Hazel has already learned that ‘Grownups figure they cannot treat you just any how. Which burns me up” (15). She demands her money back from the theatre because “I get so tired grown ups mess in over kids just cause they little and can’t take em to court” (17). But she does not have in mind the adult members of her own family. They have taught her to be truthful and to hold people to their word. As Granddaddy Vale puts it, “if that’s what I said, then that’s it” (18).

Bambara and the reader know that Hunca Bubba and Granddaddy are not evil or unkind. They see complexities in the world that Hazel is too young to understand. But Bambara does not mock Hazel; her pain is real. In an essay called “Salvation Is the Issue”, Bambara noted that the heart of “Gorilla, My Love” is a broken child-adult contract, one of those “observed violations of the Law” (Internet, 5). Bambara takes Hazel’s point of view seriously, and uses her story to ask” is it natural (sane, healthy, whole-some, in our interest) to violate the contracts/ covenants we have with our ancestors, each other, our children, our selves, and God?” (5)

Although ‘Gorilla, My Love” is humorous, and Hazel is limited to her understanding, the questions the story raises about betrayal and trust are important and real, especially for Bambara.

1.3.5 “Gorilla, My Love” has also been analysed on the autobiographical level. In the ‘Sort of Preface” to her first volume of short stories, Gorilla, My Love, Bambara explains in a light hearted way her attitude toward writing autobiographically:

It does no good to write autobiographical fiction cause the minute the book hits the stand here comes your mama screamin how could you .... and it’s no use using bits and snatches even of real events and real people, even if you do cover, guise, switch-around and change-up ....
so I deal in straight up fiction myself, cause I value my family and friends, and mostly cause I lie a lot anyway. (GML 1-2)

Bambara was always reluctant to speak about her personal life, turning interviewers’ questions aside to focus on political issues, or giving the same few vague details about her mother, Speakers’ Corner in Harlem, and the public library. And she is unusual in having left a rather large body of interviewers and essays describing her writing practice, her philosophy of art, and her sense of how art and politics must work together to achieve social change.

Given Bambara’s strong feelings, it is interesting to discover how many of the small details in “Gorilla, My Love” sprang out of her own life. In “How She Came by Her Name”, an interview conducted a short time before Bambara’s death and published after she died, she spoke more openly about her childhood than she had previously – at least, on the record. Although she does not refer specifically to Hazel in the interview, the parallels that emerge between young Toni’s life and Hazel’s are striking.

Bambara attended the public school located at 145th Street and Broadway in Harlem. Hazel attends the same public school, and like Hazel she was the smartest kid in the class. Hazel comments that her teachers “don’t like me cause I won’t sing them Southern songs” (17). Bambara remembers that her mother was alert for racism in her children’s classrooms, and “At school we were not to sing ‘Old Black Joe’” (216). Hazel’s mother has been known to come to school to speak to the teachers when they are disrespectful to their African American students, and on these occasions she dresses to impress: “She stalk in with her hat pulled down bad and that Persian lamb coat draped back over one hip” (17). Bambara remembers that her mother “had a turning-the-school outfit. She had a serious Joan Crawford hat and a Persian lamb coat” (220). And, just as Hazel’s mother ‘got pull up with the Board and bad by her own self anyhow, “Bambara’s mother” was a substitute teacher, and she had pull with the Board of Education, she knew everybody, so ‘your ass is mine’” (221). Hazel’s mother is an inspiration to
her, the one who taught her not to back down, and Bambara’s mother filled the same role for the author.

Bambara loved the movies throughout her life. She says in the interview, “I go to movies constantly because I am a film nut”, reminiscent of Hazel who is “a movie freak from way back” (GML 14). As a child, Bambara visited the same five movie houses that Hazel visits: the Dorset, on Broadway, for “Boston Blackie and the Three Stooges” [Hazel and her brothers reject the Dorset on that fateful Easter Sunday because they had “seen all the Three Stooges they was” (14)]; the RKO Hamilton for first-run movies and vaudeville shows; the Sunset and the Regal (Hazel calls it the “Regun”) which are, Hazel says, “too far, less we had grownups with us which we didn’t” (14), and which Bambara explains were on 125th Street, more than twenty blocks away; and the Washington theatre on Amsterdam Avenue for “sepia movies and second-string things” (224) like the low-budget horror movie Gorilla, My Love.

But Hazel and young Toni are not the same person. Bambara never had uncles or cousins (no Hunca Bubba), though she desperately wanted one. She did not make trips to South as some of the other children did, though she would have liked to. Her father did not use a belt on his children, and Bambara thinks with some horror about those parents who did. Bambara did not disrupt the movies she attended but would “sit there and rewrite them” because she thought they were “stupid”.

1.3.6 Another reading of the short story “Gorilla, My Love” is that the story has a gallery of wonderful characters – Jefferson Winston Vale (Hunca Hubba), Baby Juson Vale, Big Broad Vale, Granddaddy Vale, Hazel Value, Mama Valu, and a number of minor characters like Thunderbums, The Manager. The researcher cannot describe these portraits in detail for want of space. These characters are wonderful creations, especially the young ones, many of whom show similar traits of character; they are intelligent, imaginative, sensitive, proud and arrogant, witty, tough, but also poignantly vulnerable. Through these young characters, Bambara expresses the fragility, the pain, and occasionally the promise of the experience of growing up, of
coming to terms with a world that is hostile, chaotic, violent. The story reveals one of Bambara’s special gifts as a writer of fiction is her ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view.

To conclude, the title story of the collection, *Gorilla, My Love* is remarkable for its brevity of characterization, brevity of theme, brevity of plot and brevity of everything. The title story exemplifies her style, technique and wit. While the betrayal of Hazel is the main thematic element of “Gorilla, My Love”, the disillusionment which is an inevitable part of growing up is dominant in the lives of the young girls who are the narrators and main characters in “Gorilla, My Love”, “The Lesson” and “Sweet Town”.

1.4.1 If “Gorilla, My Love” is the story of Hazel, “The Lesson” is the story of a Sylvia. Like Hazel, Sylvia is the main character and its first-person narrator. In Sylvia Bambara creates a proud, sensitive, tough girl who is far too smart to ignore the realities around her, even though she knows it might be easier to do so. “Gorilla, My Love” examines the realization of betrayal and childhood and adulthood, “The Lesson” examines the realization of economic inequity in 1960s America through the eyes of a young girl.

If one reads carefully the opening narration of Sylvia, one will notice that the narrator – Sylvia – is a young, tough and smart girl. She is strongly affected by her surroundings and has the capacity to see the truth in things: “Specially Aunt Gretchen. She was the main gofer in the family. You got some ole dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you send for Aunt Gretchen. She has been screwed into the go-along for so long, it’s a blood-deep natural thing with her” (“The Lesson” 88).

Sylvia observes Aunt Gretchen in the way her family treats her. Another graphic description is of Miss Moore who has moved into the narrator’s neighbourhood recently:

... this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no make-up. ... Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. and she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. (87)
Miss Moore is unlike the other African-Americans in the neighbourhood. She wears her hair in its natural curls, she speaks proper English, she goes by her last name, she has attended college and she wants to teach the neighbourhood children about the world around them. One day Miss Moore takes the children on a field trip. She starts off by talking about how much things cost, what the children’s parents earn, and the unequal division of wealth in the United States. She makes Sylvia angry when she says that they are poor and live in the slums.

Despite her ability to see the truth in things, she also acts in a dishonest manner; she speaks of wanting to steal hair ribbons and money from the West Indian kids; she does not give the cab driver a tip, preferring to keep the money for herself; and she does not give the change from the cab. When they get to their destination, Sylvia keeps the four dollars change.

Their destination is the famous Fifth Avenue toy store, F.A.O. Schwarz. Before the group enters, they look in the store windows. They see very expensive toys – a microscope that costs 300 dollar, a paper weight that costs 480 dollar, and a sailboat that costs 1.195 dollar. While they look at these items, they talk about what they see. Miss Moore explains what a paper weight is. Sylvia gets very angry during the trip to F.A.O. Schewarz. She wonders why people could spend so much money on useless items: “Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven” (95). By the end of the story, Sylvia realizes that she feels in competition not only with Miss Moore but also with her good friend Sugar, who is ready to slide back into their usual behaviour after having had some surprising insights about the day. Rather than accompany sugar, Sylvia decides to go her own way and makes a promise to herself that no one will get ahead of her in the future.

All the events of the story are perceived through Sylvia. Sylvia is able to present a wider view of her community. She compares Miss Moore to the rest of the adults. Not only does this show how different Miss Moore is, but also indicates certain cultural standards of the time. Sylvia also presents the different types of people who inhabit her community through the children in
the group. Sylvia’s inner musings, her obvious intelligence, and her sudden feelings of anger when she is at the store show that she could very well grow up to be the kind of person that Miss Moore wants them all to be: one who resists and who invokes change.

1.4.2 Having seen a strong-willed adolescent female narrator, Sylvia, let us see the leading themes of the story. First, the story’s theme focuses on education: the need for education and the result of knowledge. It illustrates how learning can lead to discomfort but that the discomfort is necessary for positive change. The second important theme is poverty and wealth. Underlying the entire story is the notion of economic inequality between whites and blacks in the United States. The third equally important is the theme of resistance. Bambara has used her writing as an attempt to empower the African-American community; she believed that African-Americans needed to pursue a policy of resistance against the racism inherent in American society. Such a policy is evident in “The Lesson” as Miss Moore encourages the children and her neighbours to question the inequality in the world around them. On the way to the toy store she tells the children that “money ain’t divided up right in this country” (89). After the children leave the toy store she urges them to think about their society “in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven” (95). She is encouraging them to think about the world in order to resist it. Education, economic inequality and resistance, are the major themes. There are a number of minor themes which also play a vital role. First, although race is hardly specifically mentioned, it is the undercurrent of the story. The children demonstrate the racial tension they feel daily; they openly speak of how “crazy” white folks are. Second minor theme is different types of pride. In this story, Bambara examines different types of pride, the functions of leadership and the various ways people show respect or disrespect for each other. “The Lesson” demonstrates many attributes of Black Aesthetic Movement. Bambara draws on typical African-American urban culture in creating her characters and dialogue, and in focusing attention on issues of real concern. “The Lesson” focuses on the power of personality. There are
three major things that effect how people develop their character – where they are from, which includes their financial status; how they are raised; and the character of the people that have had the most influence on their lives. Sylvia is very much influenced by all of these factors. Sylvia’s living in the slums and being poor makes her defensive and judgemental. Within the scope of a dissertation, one cannot make a comprehensive study of every theme.

1.4.3 Like in “Gorilla, My Love”, Bambare creates a number of characters in “The Lesson”. Sylvia is the sun around whom all other meteors move. Sylvia who lives in a New York ghetto, is a working-class black child about twelve years old and has a strong feminist attitude. Apart from Sylvia, we have Big Butt (Fat Butt), Fly boy, Junebug, Mercedes, Miss Moore, Q. T., Sugar. Each character has a distinctive feature. Big Butt derives his nickname from his eating habits; Junebug is relatively quiet at the store; Mercedes wants to be like the rich white Americans; Miss Moore takes upon herself the responsibility to teach the neighbourhood children about the larger community and the problems that African-Americans and poor people face, in the world; Q.T. is the youngest and quietest child in the group; Sugar is Sylvia’s closest friend and her cohort. Her characters are real, vital, alive and often very funny. As in all her stories, Bambara handles in “The Lesson” the details so deftly that we can feel what the character feels:

I’m mad, but I won’t give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store be in very bored and say, ‘Let’s go’. ... Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I’m thinking. And something weird is going on, I can feel it in my chest. (95)

1.4.4 “The Lesson” is also critically analysed on the level of symbolism. Symbols are often used in stories to portray more of a literal meaning. Conventional, literary and allegory are examples of the different types of symbolism. Symbols can be displayed in many different ways. People, objects, and events are just a few of the ways. Throughout the short story “The Lesson”, Bambara uses symbolism in many areas. The title, “The Lesson” is one symbol that Bambara uses. Miss Moore, the teacher with a college degree, takes the kids on a trip to F.A.O. Miss More introduces the
facts of social inequality to a destructed group of city kids. Bambara focuses on Sylvia’s struggle with her growing awareness of class inequality. “The Lesson” is not just a spirited story about a poor girl out of place in an expensive toy store, it is a social commentary.

A great deal of symbolism can be found by simply examining the name Ms Moore. Marital status does not define her – notice the Ms Quite frankly, the reader is not even informed if she is married or even if she has children of her own. Various symbols are used in “The Lesson” by Bambara to represent the social and economic inequality faced by the children in this story.

To conclude, it is to be noted that the story, “The Lesson” demonstrates all characteristics of a good modern short story – knack of title, brevity of theme, characterization and plot. Bambara creates a host of characters, all of whom help Sylvia explore and demonstrate the issues that face poor people and minorities in the United States. Sylvia speaks and narrates in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Sylvia uses AAVE to express her self-confidence, assertiveness, and creativity as a young black girl. In the opening sentence of “The Lesson”, Bambara clearly indicates that Sylvia is narrating in AAVE. Here, Sylvia describes Miss Moore as an adult with “nappy hair” (87). The nappy, of course, originated in AAVE, though it has passed into standard usage. A lot of research has been carried out on Sylvia’s dialect by Barbara Hill Hudson, Garin Jones and Sylvia Wallace Holton.

1.5.1 “Sweet Town” : Introduction


“The Lesson” is fine in its sensitive portrayal of Sylvia. The story describes a young girl’s disillusionment with the society in which she lives and is therefore a kind of social and political commentary. “Sweet Town” centres on a more personal, yet enduringly human and universal experience of disillusionment: the failure or disappointment of young love. Again, the
narrator is a memorable young girl; but while Ollie’s loneliness and Hazel’s and Sylvia’s toughness seem their impressive qualities, it is Kit’s joie de vivre and her delightful romanticism that make her such a moving character. Her narration is light and lilting, breathless, swift, and largely free of the tough language used by Hazel and Sylvia as she recalls the ecstasy and sorrow of the spring and summer of her fifteenth year.

1.5.2 “Sweet Town” has been read and analysed on different levels. According to Nancy D. Hargrove, “Sweet Town” centres on the failure or disappointment of young love. According to Mary S. Comfort, “Sweet Town” might be considered a lighthearted retelling of the story of Penelope and Ulysses. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the first theme – disappointment of young love.

Bambara uses a number of devices to reinforce her theme of the disillusionment of young romantic love. The brevity of that love is suggested by the story’s own brevity; a scant five pages, it is the shortest of the fifteen works collected in the volume. Further, the description of the ecstatic portion of her love affair with B. J. is limited to one single page (the first two pages cover introductory material and the last two, B.J’s departure and Kit’s reaction). The story is also filled with words suggesting speed. From the opening passage, “It is hard to believe that I so quickly squandered my youth” (ST, 121), to Kit’s last view of B. J. and Eddie “dashing down the night street”, Bambara employs such words as “romped”, “dashed”, “tempo”, “race”, “jumped”, “ran”, “flying”, “pace”, and “whizzed”.

In the introductory section Kit’s character and her situation are established as much by her narrative style as by the revelation of incidents. To illustrate the crazy, magical quality of her “youth in the sweet town playground of the sunny city” (121), she describes in a breezy, grandiose style appropriate to her intensely romantic nature a series of absurd, loving notes she exchanged with her mother:

And then one day, having romped my soul through the spectrum of suny colors, I dashed up to her apartment to escape the heat and found a letter from her which eternally elated my heart to the point of
bursture and generally endeared her to me forever. Written on the kitchen table in cake frosting was the message, “My dear, mad, perverse young girl, kindly take care and point the fire escape in your leisure .... (121)

Kit quickly endears herself to the reader, whereas Sylvia grows on the reader rather more slowly. The season of spring awakens her sexuality: “With Penelope splintering through the landscape and the pores secreting animal champagne, I bent my youth to the season’s tempo and proceeded to lose my mind” (122). In the midst of ‘this sweet and drugged madness”, she meets the handsome B.J. and his less attractive friend Eddie. Both became passionate and express their romantic love. Their craziness transforms the city into a kaleidoscope of magical colours and designs and B.J. into the fertility god Pan: “Hand in hand, me and Pan, and Eddie too, whizzed through the cement Kaleidoscope making our own crazy patterns, singing our own song” (123).

But suddenly, abruptly, the ecstasy ends. Awakened from a nightmare by pebbles thrown through her open window, Kit learns that B.J. and Eddie are leaving, the latter having stolen money from his grandmother. That the harsh reality has shattered her romantic idyll is reflected in Kit’s juxtaposition of a romantic setting of casement window, garden and balcony to her grim urban setting with its stoop and milk box:

It wasn’t a casement window and there was no garden underneath ... I went to the window to see who I was going to share my balcony scene with, and there below, standing on the milk box, was B.J. I climbed out and joined him on the stoop. (124)

Her Romeo has come to bid her an unromantic farewell: “We’re cutting out” (124). Although Kit yearns to convince him to stay by expressing romantic, noble sentiments, she says instead, “I don’t know why the hell you want to hang around with that nothing .... Eddie is a shithead” (125).

Yet, in the midst of the pain and shock of the abandonment, her romantic nature briefly takes over as she imagines herself, in an amusing and curious mixture of Western movies, popular love ballads, and romantic
novels, on a long, arduous quest somewhere out West in search of the two boys:

And in every town I’ll ask for them as the hotel keeper feeds the dusty, weary travel or that I’ll be. “Have you seen two guys, one great, the other acned? If you see ‘em tell ’em Kit’s looking for them.” And I’d bandage up my cactustorn feet and sling the knapsack into place and be off. (125)

However, she then dismisses whatever may happen in that imagined future as not mattering after all, for she has been betrayed, the magical spell of youth has been broken, and its sweet fruit has begun to rot: “No matter. Days other than the here and now, I told myself, will be dry and sane and sticky with the rotten apricots oozing slowly in the sweet time of my betrayed youth” (125). The pleasure and joy of young love, which make its loss so difficult to bear, are conveyed through the title as well as through references to sweetness, to intensity (everything seems about to explode: “bursture”, “orange explosure”), to craziness, and to music (trumpets, whistling, singing). Finally, several classical references also serve to reinforce these magical qualities. We have allusion to Penelope, meant to evoke the faithful wife of Olysses. The comparisons of B.J. to Pan (lust and spring) and to Apollo (male beauty and perfection) clearly convey what he means to Kit, and what, at the end of the story, she has lost.

1.5.3 Mary S. Comfort considers the mythical allusion in Bambara’s “Sweet Town”. References to Pan and to Apollo point to classical mythology as the source for Kit’s Penelope. “Sweet Town” might be considered a lighthearted retelling of the story of Penelope and Ulysses. Like Ulysses who leaves Penelope after only a year of marriage, B. J. spends only one spring and one summer with Kit before announcing that he and his friend Eddie are “cutting out” (124). Then, like Penelope who unravels and reweaves a shroud until Odysseus returns, Kit plans to weave and reweave the story of her love for B.J. “As long as Penelope refrained from cutting the thread”, says Barbara G. Walker, “Odysseus could not die” (782). Likewise, Kit keeps the memory of her first love alive by repeating her story, hoping that “legends’ll pop up
about me and my quest. Great long twelve-bar blues ballads with eighty-nine stanzas” (125).

Comfort in her essay “Bambara’s ‘Sweet Town’” examines Kit’s character in the light of mythological allusions. The limitation of space does not permit detailed attention to each of her references. Recounting the note that frees her to love B.J. and the frustration that shows her the importance of distancing herself from her audience, Kit offers “Sweet Town” as the story of her decision to become a storyteller. The story suggests that, if the tragedy inherent in two myths can be prevented by a note written in marmalade, then the time of betrayed youth can be made sweet by a storyteller. “Sweet Town” addresses the pain of betrayal, but it is mainly about the power of telling stories.

To conclude “Sweet Town” is the shortest story of the collection. The story has all characteristics of modern short story—limited character, limited plot and limited subject matter. It has a crisped dialogue and has the precision of language. He who runs may read it.

1.6 “Happy Birthday”: Introduction

Unlike “Gorilla, My Love”, “The Lesson” and “The Town”, “Happy Birthday” is narrated by the third person. While the loneliness of a child is the main thematic element of “Happy Birthday”, the disillusionment which is an inevitable part of growing up is dominant in the lives of the young girls who are the narrators and main characters in “Gorilla, My Love”, “The Lesson”, and “Sweet Town”.

“Happy Birthday”, like “Sweet Town” is one of the shortest stories of Bambara which has a single theme, that is, the theme of isolation. This has been illustrated through the character of Ollie, an orphan, who lives with her grandfather.

The story begins in the morning with Ollie attempting to find some companionship, but she finds her grandfather drunk, the building superintendent busy, and her friend Wilma gone. In the early afternoon, she continues her search. But she finds no one. From the roof Ollie looks down
in the park, but sees no one there; indeed, “There was hardly anyone on the block. ... Everything below was gray as if the chimney had snowed on the whole block” (“Happy Birthday” 63). Desperate for some one, any one, she mounts a fire hydrant in front of the Mount Zion A.M.E. Church, flapping her arms and yelling, “This time I’m going to fly off and kill myself” (64). She attracts only the attention of a woman who scowls at her and the minister who orders her to play elsewhere. Thus even the church offers Ollie no solace. In agony, she whispers to and then yells at the pigeons, revealing to the reader the intense poignancy and pain of her loneliness on this particular day: “Better wish me happy birthday ... or somebody around here is gonna get wasted” (65). At last, a neighbour leans from her window to inquire about Ollie’s distress. Ollie yells at her, “You should never have a birthday in the summer time, cause nobody’s around to wish you happy birthday or give you a party” (65). Miss Hazel’s reply is meant to be mildly consoling, but only reveals her insensitivity and lack of understanding: “Well, don’t cry, Sugar. When you get as old as me, you’ll be glad to forget all about – ” (65). As Ollie sobs in the street, the woman closes her window “so she could hear the television good” (65). Ollie really is all alone.

Throughout the story Bambara uses a number of subtle devices to reinforce the theme of isolation. The word “Empty” appears twice as a separate sentence, and negatives are found in abundance, ‘no one”, “nothing”, “none”. The absence of people is pressed through references not only to individual characters who are away. Elements of the setting are actually empty, like the park and the block, or are symbolic of emptiness and depression, like the gray cinders from the chimney and the ruins of the burned down bar-b-que place. Even the church rejects Ollie, as the grumpy minister literally chases her from its doors. Further she is addressed several times as “little girl” rather than by her name, suggesting a lack or loss of identity, her nothingness in relation to other people.

Finally, throughout the story, one notices that the title is used ironically. “Ollie spent the whole morning waiting”, it is not until the closing passages, which describe the end of the long, lonely day, that we discover
what she is waiting for – someone who will remember what day it is and wish her “Happy Birthday”. Further, a subtly ironic contrast to Ollie’s perception of the day as sad and black is suggested when Miss Hazel’s great – grandmother, disturbed by the child’s loud sobbing in the street, comes to the window “to see who was dying and with so much noise and on such a lovely day” (65).

To conclude, “Happy Birthday” is the story of Ollie who is anxiously waiting for her birthday. It is seen from the opening to the closing of the story that Ollie is alone, all alone. Bambara depicts children whom she calls “tough little compassionate kids” (Louis Massiah, 231). These children like Ollie, live in a world where grown-ups often carelessly violate the contracts they have made with them. In “Happy Birthday” we have a number of grown-ups like Granddaddy Larkins, Chalky, Wilma, Chestnut and his wife, Mrs. Robinson, Ronnie, James, Ferman, Frenchie, Miss Frenchmouth, Peter proper, Marbles, Reveren Hall, Miss Hazel, and Miss Hazel’s great grandmother, who are the representatives of the U.S. society and who do not keep any contact with Ollie.

The story “Happy Birthday” is also noted for its brevity of theme, characterization, plot. Unity of impression is maintained throughout the story. What Bambara speaks in her interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall– “Temperamentally, I move toward the short story because I’m a sprinter rather than a long-distance runner.” – holds true to this story (6).

1.7 If disillusionment, loss, loneliness unselfishness, love, betrayal and endurance are the themes of Gorilla, My Love, The Lesson, Sweet Town and Birthday Party, the value of human solidarity, of love for family or one’s fellowman are the themes which centre on young girls. “The Hammer Man” is about unity and comradeship with a former enemy; “Maggie of the Green Bottles” focuses on a very special bond between a young girl and an old woman; “Raymond’s Run” deals with a sister’s love for her retarded brother.

Of the fifteen stories of Gorilla, My Love, “The Hammer Man” is narrated by the youngster who is the sole unnamed narrator. However, she is similar to her young counterparts in being tough, sensitive, and imaginative,
though she is not as tough as Sylvia, as sensitive as Hazel, or as imaginative as Kit. In general, her character does not seem to be drawn with as much complexity as theirs. Yet her story is a very moving one, even though its central incident clearly does not have a lasting effect on her. It revolves around her relationship with Manny, an older boy, who is mentally disturbed. As the story opens, the reader learns that the narrator has taken the hammer and insulted him. He camps out on her doorstep for days or weeks, waiting to retaliate: “Manny told [my father] right off that he was going to kill me first chance he got” (“The Hammer Man” 37). Meanwhile, she feigns yellow fever in order to stay in the safety of her home. During this time period, Bambara has given us the quarrels and fights of both the relatives. The antagonism is deep, longlasting and widespread.

In course of time, it so happens that Manny falls off the roof and is too disabled to be dangerous. The protagonist immediately recovers from her illness and returns to the outside world. Because “Manny stayed indoors for a long time, ... [she] almost forgot about him” (38).

Suddenly one night Manny re-enters her life, and just as suddenly she and her former enemy become strangely and briefly joined in a bond of solidarity. She watches her old antagonist, the crazy boy of the neighbourhood, talking to himself and shooting baskets on a court at night. When the cops try to interfere, she defends him, but they take him away. By the time she learns he was sent to a state hospital, she is already competing in a fashion show: “And the nit was spring finally, and me and Violet was in this very boss fusion show at the center. And Miss Rose brought me my first corsage – yellow roses to match my shoes” (42-43).

The story is positive in its portrayal of the capacity of human beings. The protagonist is clearly presented as admirable in her desire to protect Manny against what seems to her powerful forces of injustice and cruelty. The experience, the story suggests, is valuable not only in itself but also as an integral part of the process of maturation, in which the young individual learns to see others sympathetically and to join with them against (or even defend them from) threatening forces.
1.8.1 “Maggie of the Greenbottles” : Introduction

“Maggie of the Greenbottles” is the story of the relationship between a young girl and an old woman, apparently Bambara’s great-grandmother. As in several other stories, although the narrator is grown and is recalling an episode from her childhood, she narrates it from the child’s point of view, as the child that she was experienced it. In this particular story, the child-narrator is an innocent eye, for she does not understand fully the meanings of so many of the things she describes. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see what type of an old woman Maggie is and her relationship with Peaches in particular and other characters of the story in general.

1.8.2 Maggie, in “Maggie of the Green Bottles” becomes a quirky expert, but expert nonetheless. She lives with her daughter and son-in-law and their children. Because the son-in-law dislikes her, Maggie first has to learn to handle his insults, discovering how far she can insult him before he completely loses face.

Maggie must content with a negative impression of herself. While to the other characters in the story, Maggie is a crazy old woman, a free-loading relative, and an alcoholic, to Peaches, she is a kind of fairy godmother endowed with many special qualities. She is magical and enchanted, possessing wisdom and knowledge about astrology, the planets, destiny; her room is a “sanctuary of heaven charts and incense pots and dream books and magic stuffs” (155). She is strong-willed and tough, with Aries as her astrological sign. She wins Peaches’s awed admiration by taking on the child’s powerful father, variously described by the child as a giant, a monster, a Neanderthal, in titanic verbal battles. In describing these encounters, Peaches appropriately compares the pugnacious Maggie to David pitted against Goliath. In fact, Maggie will do battle with any one: [S]he’d tackle the lot of them right there in the yard, blood kin or by marriage, and neighbours or no” (153). Finally, she is not ordinary; according to Peaches, she is “truly inspired” wanting to rise above the level to which she is bound, aspiring to greatness of some kind. She wears lace, writes with astral signs and tea-leaf readings. The book of Maggie inspired great granddaughter. The
little girl grows up feeling that she is indeed a very gifted creature with the ability and the obligation to achieve the extraordinary: “I was destined for greatness. She assured me. And I was certain of my success, as I was certain that my parents were not my parents, that I was descended, anointed and ready to gobble up the world from urgent, noble Olympiads” (153).

Peaches does not see Maggie as a ‘freeloading’ relative, nor does she seem concerned about her bizarre treatment of their dog. Peaches pays little attention to her father whenever he battles with her. Maggie dies of alcoholism. Peaches never goes to see her bottles, nor does she feel anything about her drunken supports. When family members distribute her belongings, Peaches’s father asks her to choose what she wants, since Peaches had seen “her special.” Peaches selects the green bottle. Although she has lost Maggie and the magic bottles, and feels very small, she still describes herself as “the hope of the Aries line” and says only that she is lavender ink, and generally scorns those who are satisfied with the mundane:

... Margaret Cooper Williams wanted something she could not have. And it was the sorrow of her life that all her children and theirs were uncooperative – worse, squeamish. Too busy taking in laundry, buckling at the knees, putting their faith in Jesus, mute and sullen in their sorrow, too squeamish to band together and take the world by storm, make history, or even to appreciate the calling of Maggie the Ram, or the Aries that came after. (153)

Her relationship with her great-granddaughter is a very special one. Maggie keeps notes for Peaches in a book originally intended for good wishes upon Christening. Maggie’s book contains drawings of “the fearsome machinery which turned the planets and coursed the stars” (152). The book informs Peaches that “as an Aries babe I was obliged to carry on the work of other Aries greats from Alexander right on down to anyone you care to mention” (152). In short, Maggie’s book expands into a collection of folklore, of crying “just like” an ordinary child, implying that she is not one.

In this story, one can see the fund of knowledge of literature of magic, myth and fairy tale. Bambara makes use of imagery, comparisons, and
symbols of magic, myth and fairy tale with a view to create the enchanted world shared by Maggie and Peaches. Maggie herself is likened obliquely to a fairy godmother who bestows as gift on a child at her christening, as in “Sleeping Beauty”. She is also called “Maggie the Rum”, a reference to Aries, the first sign of the zodiac, which represents the creative impulse and the thunderbolt. Peaches is compared to a descendant of the gods of Olympus, particularly to Athena, and she is associated twice with Alexander the Great through her zodiacal sign Aries, which she shares with Maggie. In most myths and fairy tales, a sinister figure is set in opposition to the hero, heroine, and Bambara’s story contains such a figure. Peaches’s father, an enormous, pugnacious man “whom Grandma Williams used to say was just the sort of size man put on this earth for the ’spress purpose of clubbing us all to death” (155), is described as a monster, a giant, a wolf man, the phantom of the opera, and “gross Neanderthal”.

Finally, the narrator’s use of religious terminology in connection with Maggie reinforces her perception of her great-grandmother as a sacred and suggests her feelings of reverence and awe. Maggie’s room is called a “sanctuary”, and in her encounters with Peaches’s father she is a Biblical David to his Goliath. Just prior to her death, Peaches notes that “she was humming one of those weird songs of hers which always made her seem holier and blacker than she could’ve been. And Peaches’s worshipful attitude toward her is revealed in the metaphorical positions she adopts in praising the old woman’s “guts” : “It is to Maggie’s guts that I bow forehead to the floor and kiss her hand” (153) and “I must genffect and kiss her ring” (155).

1.9.1 “Raymond’s Run” : Introduction

“Raymond’s Run” first appeared in 1971 in an anthology edited by Bambara, *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks*. A year later it appeared in her first collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love*. Along with others in the collection *Gorilla, My Love*, it has been classed as among the first to place a young black female as a central character in the bildungsroman tradition. In “Raymond’s Run”, the young Hazel Parker relates the events of two days in her life in which she prepares for and runs a race.
Critics like Elizabeth Muther (“Bambara’s feisty girls : resistance narratives in Gorilla, My Love – Toni Cade Bambara – Critical Essay”, 2002), Susan Willis (“Problematizing the Individual : Toni Cade Bambara’s Stories for the Revolution”, 1987), Mick Gidley (“Reading Bambara’s ‘Raymond’s Run’”, 1990), Nancy D. Hargrove (“Youth in Toni Cade Bambara’s Gorilla, My Love”, 1983) and a host of others have praised Bambara’s compassionate portrayal of the African-American community, a community in which Hazel Parker takes centre stage and speaks with her own voice. Through the use of voice as well as theme, “Raymond’s Run” emphasizes the importance of achieving selfhood for young black women within the context of community. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the analysis of the story by these critics.

1.9.2 “Raymond’s Run” plunge its readers immediately into the world of its narrator Hazel, known in her neighbourhood as “Squeaky, a young black girl verging on adolescence. Hazel makes two discoveries while she was growing up. One has to do with her retarded older brother, for whose care she is responsible, and the other with her rival in the May Day races. As in the two previous stories, both discoveries reveal the value of human solidarity, of love for family and friends.

Hazel is a totally engaging character. In a narrative style entirely free of the strong language used by most of the other young narrators, she reveals a refreshing honesty as well as a dedication to hard work and a dislike of phonies. She is assertive, challenging, even combative. She clearly knows who and what she is. Her life centers on two things : caring for Raymond and running. At the story’s beginning she indicates that the former is a large and consuming task, but one which she accepts stoically and with love :

All I have to do in life is mind my brother Raymond, which is enough .... He needs looking after cause he’s not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too .... But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. (23)
If Raymond has her heart, running has her soul. She tells us honestly, but not arrogantly, “I’m the fastest thing on two feet. There is no track meet that I don’t win the first place medal” (23). She works hard to improve her skill, and she illustrates her disgust with those who pretend they never practise by describing Cynthia Procter, who always says, after winning the spelling bee, “‘I completely forgot about [it].’ And she’ll clutch the lace on her blouse like it was a narrow escape. Oh, brother” (25).

She is also determined to be herself, rather than what others want her to be. Rebelling against her mother’s desire for her to “act like a girl for a change” and participate in the May Pole dance instead of the fifty-yard dash, she insists that “you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can’t afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once a life time cause it won’t fit next year” (27). Although when she was younger she had once been a “strawberry in a Hansel and Gretel pageant”, she now asserts, “I am not a strawberry. I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about” (28).

The May Day race, the central episode of the story, is thus of tremendous importance to Hazel. She is determined to win again, especially because she has a new challenger in Gretchen who has recently moved into the neighbourhood. As she is running, she notices that Raymond is running his own race outside the fence. Suddenly she realizes that she could teach Raymond to run and thereby make his life more meaningful; thus, whether or not she herself has won the race now becomes a secondary:

And I’m smiling to beat the band cause if I’ve lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I’ve won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion ... I’ve got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own? (32)

Her sincere love for her brother and her excitement at discovering something that he can learn to do well are so intense that “by the time he comes over I’m jumping up and down so glad to see him – my brother Raymond, a great
runner in the family tradition” (32). Ironically, everyone assumes that she is elated because she has again won first place.

Almost simultaneously she realizes that, far from disliking her rival or feeling superior to her, she admires her for her obvious skill in and dedication to running: “And I smile (at Gretchen). Cause she’s good, no doubt about it. May be she’d like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is serious about running, as any fool can see” (32). The story ends with the two girls smiling at each other with sincere appreciation for what the other is.

To conclude, Hazel represents the best youthful humanity in her unselfish desire to make her brother’s life more significant, in her determination to be herself, and in her honest admiration of the abilities of a rival. But it is perhaps her wise understanding of what is most to be valued in “being people” that makes her such an appealing character.

The story is also remarkable for its vibrant idiomatic language, and upbeat tempo, which are compelling features of the story, are characteristic of Bambara’s style. Her ability to capture, translate and play in and out of the voices and idioms of black communities has been widely admired. Susan Willis, in her essay, “Problematising the individual: Toni Cade Bambara’s Stories for the Revolution” (1987), makes a comparative study of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and Toni Cade Bambara, and observes: “Morrison’s Sula and Claudia and Bambara’s Hazel are deeply inquisitive and often sharply critical of established order, fearless in the face of authority, and profoundly sensitive to other people’s needs and desires” (39). According to Elizabeth Muther, Hazel in both stories – “Gorilla, My Love”, “Raymond’s Run” – is a prescient warrior – and a defensive hero for her male siblings, whom she loves. These stories are rare in this collection, and are among Bambara’s most often anthologized works.

1.10.1 “My Man Bovanne”:

Ms. Hazel of “My Man Bovanna” and Honey of “Witchbird”, struggle hard to establish their identities. The children of Ms. Hazel do not see their mother as a whole person and thus fail in their responsibility to truly honour
the elders and their community. Like Ms. Hazel, Honey fights having her identity dichotomized. The story follows her aversion to being entrapped in stereotypical “mammy” roles as both an actress and a woman. Ms. Hazel and Honey are dichotomized by the individuals who seek to constrain them and the society which attempts to narrow their distinctiveness. The reflection of Bambara can be seen in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use”, and Gloria Naylor’s “Kiswana Browne”, chapter from Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place.*

In her article “African-American Women Writers, Black Nationalism, And the Matrilineal Heritage” (1994) J. S. Korenman makes a comparative study of the stories of Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor. To quote Joan S. Korenman: All three stories depict conflicts between well-educated black nationalist daughters and their “politically incorrect” mothers. Although the three writers are closer in age and background to the daughters, all three celebrate the mother and represent the daughter as self-righteous and misguided in her espousal of black nationalism. These features are very likely related; that is to say, both the writers’ celebration of the mother and their reservations about black nationalism grow out of their high regard for the matrilineal heritage (144).

“My Man Bovanne” is one of Bambara’s most endearing stories of the collection, *Gorilla, My Love,* and representative of her ‘straight up fiction” (Gorilla “Preface”) that persists throughout her stories. The piece is not at all lengthy but the content hits like a ton of bricks.

“My Man Bovanne”, the first story of *Gorilla, My Love,* gets its impetus from the Black Power Movement, just beginning. The younger generation has begun to cast off its slave names for African ones. The values of life such as love, consideration, respect for one’s elders like mothers, aunts, and grandmothers have undermined by the younger generation. The story – “My Man Bovanne” – reflects Bambara’s strong belief in the African American oral tradition as a conduit for keeping the ‘strength of the past, available in the present, able to move our future, while also embracing the value of elders to the younger generation of the community” (Tate 69).
The title of the short story is ironic because “My Man Bovanne” is a meaningless, put expression to all the people who utilize it in the story; to them it is merely a “hip” way to address an old, blind man for whom they have no real feeling. On the other hand, Miss. Hazel, the story’s narrator, who at the story’s outset insists that Bovanne “ain’t my man, mind you” (3), by the end of the story has taken in Bovanne out of empathy and concern, qualities lacking in all the others who deal with Bovanne in the story.  

1.10.2 “My Man Bovanne” tells a fictional tale of a woman named Hazel and her tribulations dealing with a world that seems to have forgotten the importance of elders.

Miss. Hazel, aged sixty-one, is the protagonist of the story. She is confronted by her children for dancing with an elderly blind man at a political party. She is faced with many emotions while her kids prosecute her. She feels like she is being harassed by the police on two accounts, almost as if she is put on the stand and being judged by her own offspring. Her children say that she is dancing “like a bitch in heat” (5), obviously showing no respect for their own mother. She feels for their action and she says “Terrible thing when your own children talk to you like that” (5). She tries to keep her composure and defends herself to her moderating children.

To her three grown children, Hazel’s behaviour is embarrassing and politically regressive. Elo and Hazel had an argument over Hazel wearing wigs. Elo tries to please her mother, but Hazel can not believe this and she says “she can’t put a sure hand on me and say Mama we love you and care about you and you entitled to enjoy yourself cause you a good woman?” (8). The rest of her kids do not show a whole lot of respect to their mother. I can imagine that their father died the children tried to replace him by being authorities to Hazel. This would explain why all of Hazel’s kids talk down to her and try to tell her what to do and how to do it.

Task, her son, tells his mother that she was supposed to talk with Reverend Trent about using his basement for campaign headquarters. Hazel has no reason to do this because she does not respect the reverend and she
feels used by her own kids and she did agree to anything before Task said that she was supposed to do this.

Hazel’s children want her to form the Council of Elders, encouraging them to become politically active. Hazel, however, keeps company with Bovanne, “cause he blind and old and don’t nobody there heed him since they grown up and don’t need they skates fixed no more”(9). She knows the importance of historical continuity that the Elders represent and how unimportant, but politically seductive, passing fads are to youth.

The tone that Bambara uses is critical. She uses Hazel’s character to fulfil her own stances on race and age. Bambara makes use of the African slave dialect to portray a more real sense of African roots within hazel as to imply that Miss Hazel has been around and back again. It almost certifies that Hazel has more credibility and experience when it comes to racism and life all together. Discussing the difficulty of giving expression to the African-American experience in a language other than one’s mother tongue, Bambara told interviewer Kalamuya Salaam that she regards the African-American mothertongue to be “the language of Langston Hughes, the language of Grandma, the language of ‘mama say’” (150). If Grandma and mama go unheard because they are deemed politically incorrect, the loss is enormous. In the conclusion of the story, Bambara’s own feelings really come out through Hazel about protecting the voice of the elderly:

Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program going, and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation. (9-10)

1.10.3 According to Joan S. Korenman, “My Man Bovanne” depicts the role of gender. Natalie M. Rosinsky in her article on “Mothers and Daughters : another Minority Group” (1980) states that gender plays an important role in Bambara’s depiction of Hazel’s children. While all three criticize their mother and disapprove of her “‘apolitical self’” (5), it is the daughter’s criticism that is sharpest and that hurts her most deeply. Joe Lee’s disparaging remarks
about Hazel’s uninhibited dancing disappoint her; she expects him to be more understanding: “My own son ... knows what kind of warm I am about” (4). But neither his criticism nor her younger son Task’s upsets her the way her daughter Elo’s does. Whereas the two sons try to reason with Hazel and cajole her into modifying her behaviour, Elo lashes out bitterly, calling her mother a “horny bitch” and “a bitch in heat” (7, 5). Hazel notes how tentatively Elo puts a hand on her shoulder, “like she hasn’t done since she left home and the hand landin light and not sure it supposed to be there” (7). Hazel admits that this “hurt me to my heart” because Elo is the child she felt closest to:

Cause it was more me in the child than in the others. And even after task it was the girlchild I covered in the night and wept over for no reason at all less it was she was a chub-chub like me and not very pretty, but a warm child. And how did things get to this, that she can’t put a sure hand on me and say Mama we love you and care about you and you entitled to enjoy yourself cause you a good woman. (7-8)

1.10.4 “My Man Bovanna” reflects upon the implications of the Civil rights and Black nationalist movements. Many African-American women who had been active in these movements began to voice their dissatisfaction with the way women were regarded in these movements. The autobiography of Angela Davis (1974) throws light on the prevailing conditions of these movements. Frances Beale, in her article ‘Slave of a Slave No More : Black Women in Struggle” (1975) observes that “many black women are ‘turned off’ because of the blatant chauvinist attitudes exhibited by their brothers and became frustrated and disillusioned with so called revolutionary organizations” (143).

The fiction written by African-American women in the seventies and early eighties also express strong reservations about black nationalism. They present black nationalism as a threat to the matrilineal heritage.

In “My Man Bovanna” Bambara critiques a shallow understanding of Black Nationalism. The children’s politics are concerned with making the
older people conform to nationalist ideals which do not correspond to their realities. Fed up with her children’s meddling, their mother leaves the community get together with Mr. Bovanna. They go to her house where she proceeds to bathe and tuck him in. Their relationship is not sexual. She says that “you have to take care of the older folks, [it is] the folks who support the people who do the organizing” (9). She quotes the nationalist rhetoric of one of her children who touts that ‘old folks is the nation” (10). The children’s quote refers to her as the ‘old folks” but she refers to Mr. Bovanne. Here she takes the place of the ideal revolutionary while the “real” revolutionaries are consumed with ego, vanity, and their concept of what the revolution should look like but without the follow-through.

To conclude, it is to be noted that “My Man Bovanne” like Walker’s “Everyday Use”, Gloria Naylore’s “Kiswa Browne”, celebrates the mother and portrays unsympathetically daughters whose adherence to black nationalism prevents them from appreciating their matrilineal heritage.

1.11 “Blues Ain’t No Mockin Bird”:

“Blues ain’t No Mockin Bird” was published in Bambara’s acclaimed collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love*. Like most of Bambara’s stories, “Blues Ain’t No Mockin Bird” features strong African-American female characters and reflects social and political issues of particular concern to the contemporary African-American community.

In the story, the young female narrator is playing with her neighbours and cousin at her grandmother’s house. Two white film-makers, shooting a film “about food stamps” for the country, lurk near their yard. The narrator’s grandmother asks them to leave: not heeding her request, they simply move farther away. When Granddaddy Cain returns from hunting a chicken hawk, he takes the camera from the men and smashes it. Cathy, the distant cousin of the narrator, displays a precocious ability to interpret other people’s actions and words as well as an interest in story telling and writing. Her intelligence and ambition echo Bambara’s own accomplishments as well as the larger African-American story telling tradition.
Ruth Elizabeth Burks, in her essay “From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language” (1984) observes: But “Blues” is unique to Gorilla, My Love for it delineates the one story in this collection in which male and female cooperatively harmonize. Characters in the other tales seem unable to approach this type of man-woman symmetry. ... With the exception of “Blues”, it is only when women come together in these stories that the spiritual Communion Bambara feels must exist, before real communication can take place, occurs” (21).

It is seen in the previous stories, the black females are assertive, defiant and proud. The character of Grandma in “Blues Ain’t No Mockin Bird” exhibits a strong will and determination to protect her privacy and property.

1.12 "Talkin’ Bout Sonny":

While the majority of the stories in Gorilla, My Love focus on the experiences of black women, many of the lessons they teach are universal.

In one story, ‘Talkin’ Bout Sonny’, Bambara focuses on two males who struggle to cope with some very real but invisible force which threatens their mental stability. The narrator, Betty Butler, is a social worker who is dating Delauney, a divorced father of the two girls. The story is set in a local bar where Betty and Delauney are discussing their friend Sonny’s recent emotional collapse and stabbing of his wife. The narrator cannot understand the casualness with which Delauney is able to discuss the incident. As she reflects on her past observations of Sonny and Delauney, she realizes that they are trying to contain a periodic rage, directed at no particular person, which they can not fully explain. Delauney is at least able to describe the effect that the rage has on his and Sonny’s behaviour:

I can wake up not thinking anything in particular and all of a sudden it’s on me. A cloud of evil. A fit of nastiness takes over ... that cloud of evil zooms in on you .... Fifty some add days of pure shit jammed into one mad moment and boom – you plant a razor in your wife’s throat. (80)
In short, Delauney knows he cannot help Sonny until he can help himself. Bambara seems to suggest that it is the overall pressure of living in modern society which triggers Sonny’s fits and Delauney’s evil moods.

To conclude with the remarks of Alice A. Deck: “Talkin’ Bout Sonny” is one of Bambara’s more sobering stories in *Gorilla, My Love* as it is unrelieved by her usual moments of comic relief” (Deck, 17).

1.13 “The Johnson Girls”:

The budding friendship between girls in “Raymond’s Run” is deepened in the strong women’s kinship ties in “The Johnson Girls”, where the women bond together in order to affirm their experiences and teach the next generation. “The Johnson Girls” expresses the necessity of women’s community.

Great Ma Drew is the housekeeper and matriarch who presides over the family, though it is Inez who owns the home. She sets the stage for the intimate Sister circle by speaking of the importance of women’s kinship networks. In the first pages of the story Great Ma Drew mourns the state of younger women’s romantic affairs and blames this on the fact that older women are not teaching younger women about men, charms, and reading signs. She then recommends that Inez use juju to help change her partner’s mind about leaving her. She is also a root worker, or traditional healer, who uses herbs in order to help steer events in a certain course. She reads a pack of playing cards like tarot cards in attempts to help to mend the rift between Inez and her partner. Great Ma Drew’s use of herbs affirms African traditional medicinal knowledge.

Inez’s room is packed full of her women friends. The close-nit nature of the community is underscored by the title “The Johnson Girls” though we never find out which of the women are related by blood and which of them, extended kin. These women help Inez in packing her suitcase which she needs for her coming trip. The young narrator explains the important role the women play in nurturing Inez and making communal decisions:
It always winds up to a moment like this when there’s some big things in Inez’s life and all her friends gather, .... And everybody lays out their program, ...., they ... exchange advice and yell at each other’s stupidities and trade stories and finally lay the consensus thing to be done on Inez. (170)

The women support one another on many levels. Great Ma Drew works with the spirits, the women buoy Inez with the courage she needs to sustain herself and they also discuss relationships for Black women. This story-telling is critical because it works to educate the young narrator and to reinforce the women’s own experiences. The women use their own experiences as a way of constructing knowledge. It is the validating of their experiences that gives Inez the courage she needs to confront her partner.

Inez’s friends discuss the double standard between Black men and women as it is manifested in romantic relationships. It is significantly more difficult for Black women to find a man than for Black men to find a woman. One of the women laments that:

A man, no matter how messy he is ... can always get some good woman, two or three for that matter, ... But a woman?: if her shit ain’t together, she can forget it .... But if she got her Johnson together, is fine in her do, superbad in her work, and terrible, terrible extra plus with her woman thing, .... (172)

The women express this division between Black men and women in terms of the fragmented nature of Black men. The women mourn that as Black women it is difficult to find a well rounded man. Instead they must settle for certain core qualities, one at a time in a man. The women divide these men into several categories. They debate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the “handy man”, “fucking man, “go-around man”, “gopher man”, “money man”, and the “tenderman” (168). The women finally reject having to settle for a fragmented man and demand everything. This choice is significant. It is the women’s community, the validating of each other, that enables the women to come to this critical consciousness, this valuing themselves enough not settling for a fractured man. “A la carte is a bitch” (169) Sugar announces,
referring to having to settle for one aspect of a man at a time. The women all agree that Inez’s man is worth fighting for, because he is all of the above categories, a “blue light special” (177). The story ends with the women designing a plan to get Roy back. For the first time in the story the women give him a name. He is not generalised into one of the above categories. He is now a whole person, as a community they have validated him, and decided that he is worth fighting for. They then mobilize in order to heal this rift in their community by communally examining the letter he wrote to Inez before leaving.

The story, “The Johnson Girls” is also analysed on the important role of space in both resistance and oppression. While commenting on this powerful area of contention, Smith observes “In “The Johnson Girls” the community of women creates a safe gendered space to process and act upon the unique problems they face as Black women” (73). This women’s space is marked by the closeness of their bodies. The space is also marked by the colourful feminine clothing that the women pull from closets and drawers as they attempt to help Inez pack for her imminent trip to confront her partner who has left her. It is through the creation of a safe space that they are able to voice the particular nexus of romantic issues they encounter as Black women. The women lament the double standard between Black men and women that means that they can rarely find a man that meets all of their standards, though men can easily access good Black women. The women’s space enables them to move from articulating the issues, to expressing sadness and anger, onto action. At the end of the story one of the women makes the decision to stop settling for the wrong man and the women decide to help Inez construct a strategy for recapturing her errant partner, who they decide is worth the time and effort. It is only through the creation of this space, however, that the women are able to express, reaffirm their truth, and move to praxis.

1.14 “Basement”:

The foreman of a tenement building is made accountable to his community after he fondles and exposes himself to little girls in the “Basement”. He breaks the unspoken agreement of his role as an elder male,
a father or uncle in the community. He abuses his authority by taking advantage of the little girls. The story features Patsy’s mother, Patsy’s aunt, Patsy, and the narrator. Patsy’s mother warns the two little girls to stay out of the basement because the foreman is known to molest little girls. When the girl tells her that he has already shown them his privates she flies into a rage and beats the “hell out the super” to the point where, “his stockin cap sailin in the air” (147). The story emphasizes the necessity of women to educate one another. When the narrator presses for why they should avoid the basement, Patsy’s aunt explains:

Because some men when they get to drinking don’t know how to behave properly to women and girls. Understand? ...You see, it’s very hard to teach young girls to be careful and the same time not scare you to death. Sex is not a bad thing. But sometimes it’s a need that makes men act bad, take advantage of little girls who are friendly and trusting. Understand? (143)

In this story Patsy’s mother establishes a women’s circle where older women pass down knowledge to younger ones. She acts as an advocate for the girls who fights for them since they are “friendly and trusting.” She also holds the super accountable for his mis-behaviour by beating him.

1.15 “The Survivor”:

A symbiotic, almost speechless relationship between an older woman and her niece is presented in “The Survivor”, the only story in this collection written in the third person past tense; its stream of consciousness, flashback structure obfuscates, and its images appear contrived. The substitution of the first person present tense for the thoughts of the niece – who is about to give birth – diminishes the story’s immediacy and poignancy. The sophisticated, metaphoric language used to describe Jewel’s thoughts seems schizophrenic and masks the events that alienated the women from their mates and left them survivors.
1.16 “Mississippi Ham Rider”: 

“Mississippi Ham Rider” is one of the adult-narrated stories of *Gorilla, My Love*. “Mississippi Ham Rider” is the story of Rider, aged seventy, whose profession is to record songs. He is also a great blues singer. He used to sing obscene songs for party records. The Depression forms an important background to the story. The Depression resulted in – many became homeless or migrated to cities, often living on the outskirts, decline in industrial production, mass unemployment, half of the nation’s banks had failed, farmers were badly hit, and many lost their farms, no social security, the unemployed relied on charity and on soup kitchens to keep them from starvation. Its effects were powerfully described in much contemporary writing, typically through the technique of social realism and often with a radical edge. Bambara, too, described its effects in her story, “Mississippi Ham Rider”. On account of the Depression, “the companies fell apart and these singers went on home” (49). Ham Rider and his family along with the band of singers decided to leave the South and settle in the north; they journeyed to New York.

1.17 “Playin with Punjab”: 

When Miss Ruby, the white community worker, is not accountable to Punjab, one of the community’s most formidable characters, she loses the community’s trust. “Playin with Punjab” features a tough community girl narrator who works as Miss Ruby’s assistant. Punjab, the local loan shurk, has a reputation for being especially tough and inflexible in collecting debts. The name Punjab may refer to the eight-foot Indian figure in the “Little Orphan Annie” comic strip who was characterised as silent but deadly strong. Punjab develops a crush on Miss Ruby and shifts some of his community knowledge action to a more progressive cause. He bails out some of the community leaders, protects Miss Ruby, and brings food to the community centre. However, in the election to pick community leaders for the poverty council, Miss Ruby betrays the community people by not allowing Punjab to have a seat. She chooses an election process that alienates many of the citizens who assume Punjab will get the position because he is most suited for it. Instead
the election, which most people do not show up for, yields two lack luster candidates. Miss Elaine, an elder in the community, confronts Miss Ruby by standing up for Punjab, who, she states, everyone knew “should be one of them peoples what go to places and talk with the Man. So I don’t even see no sense whatever to these cards” (74). Miss Ruby ignores the dissention and instead places her confidence in the vote and tells people they should have exercised their right as voters. The next day the office is wrecked by vandals, probably Punjab himself. The community members agree that it was warranted and accuse Miss Ruby of betraying them. Sneaker, one of the Brothers from the neighbourhood, expresses this sentiment, “Miss Ruby was full of shit with all her foolishness about power and equality and responsibility and sacrifice, and then cop right out when the chips were down” (75). Miss Ruby’s investment in the organization’s vote, a process that the community did not believe in, and her refusal to make changes that would reflect their will, reflects a breach of their trust that cost her both Punjab’s and the community’s loyalty.

To conclude, *Gorilla, My Love* contains fifteen stories. All but four of the fifteen stories in *Gorilla, My Love*, are framed by the consciousness of a child or adolescent protagonist. The narrator of “The Johnson Girls” is on borderline. ‘Happy Birthday” is the only story about a child in the collection that is voiced in the third person. The remaining are the adult narrated stories.

These stories are set in a northern city and told, in black dialect, by black females who are assertive, defiant, and proud. Other female characters in the stories possess the same characteristic. These female characters, as Bambara states, break open the bitch stereotype to reveal a proud, championship spirit ... a survivor. For example, the character of Grandma in “Blues Ain’t No Mockin Bird” exhibits a strong will and determination to protect her privacy and property. Another example of a strong female character is the young runner in “Raymond’s Run” who exhibits enormous pride, because she is the fastest runner in the neighbourhood. The last statement in the story – “My Man Bovanne” – sums up the mother’s defiance to her children’s stereotyping, “I say just like the hussy my daughter always
say I was” (10). The young black female narrator, in the story “The Hammer Man”, stands up to the police and defends Manny. Sylvia, in the story ‘The Lesson” is shown at the end as a proud, defiant and a champion girl who speaks : “She (sugar) can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin” (96). The collection is full of such examples. The limitation of space does not permit detailed attention to each of his stories, an attempt, therefore, is made to indicate the range and quality by reference to the representative ones only. Saturday Review aptly observes: Gorilla, My Love is “among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time” (97).

1.19 The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories: Introduction:

In the dozen or so years between the publication of “Gorilla, My Love” and The Salt Eaters, Bambara published her most explicitly political stories in the collection The Sea Birds Are Still Alive. From the release of Gorilla, My Love (1972) to the publication of Bambara’s second collection of short stories, The Sea Birds Are Still Alive (1977), the author travelled extensively. In particular, her visits to Cuba in 1973, a move to Atlanta with her daughter, Karma, in 1974, and a visit to Vietnam in 1975 had a powerful impact on many of the stories in the collection. In Cuba, she met many women working in factories, on the land, and in the street who were able to resolve class and colour conflicts. In Vietnam, she was “struck by the women’s ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations” (Bell, 238). In reflecting back on that period, Bambara refers to herself as “a nationalist; ... a feminist” (Tate, 14) and her political voice roars more loudly with themes of the injustices inflicted upon children and minority women’s struggle against oppression.

The effect of Bambara’s travels abroad, her relocation to Atlanta, and her work in so many community art groups can be seen in the stories published in The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories (1977). One notices that at least five of the stories are set outside of an urban center; the title story is in Southeast Asia. The characters in many of these stories move across greater geographical distances than did those in her first collection, and
their immediate concerns are not so much with their personal relationships as with their involvement in art groups, community centers, or sociopolitical organizations. Three of the protagonists in the stories in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* resonate with a strong feminist voice: Virginia in “The Organizer’s Wife”, Lacey in “Broken Field Running”, and the narrator in “The Apprentice”. “The Organizer’s Wife”, “The Apprentice”, “Broken Field Running”, “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” and “The Long Night” all focus on the need for people in a community to organize and keep a spiritual faith in their efforts even during periods of major setbacks and low consciousness. All of the central characters in these stories are combatants who have the strength not only to resist, but to inspire others in their circle to continue the fight.

The remaining five stories in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* – “Medley”, “A Tender Man”, “Witchbird”, “Christmas Eve at Johnson Drugs N Goods” – focus on the relationships between Afro-American men and women. A careful study of these stories indicates that while defeat and despair are not the focus of these stories, there is less high spirited humour than in *Gorilla, My Love*. The various neighbourhoods described in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* do not offer the same sort of comfort or sense of belonging as in *Gorilla, My Love*. In “Broken Field Running”, for example, the characters live in housing projects which are ridden with black-on-black crime and walk along sidewalks with broken pavements and glass bottles. In “A Girl’s Story” we sense the wide emotional and physical distance among those living in a crowded apartment. Even those stories which focus on the personal love between two individuals present a strained or exploitative situation. The passenger on the boat in “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” are crowded next to one another, yet they are emotionally isolated from one another. In this particular collection, Bambara writes about strong female girls because “in her vision, in her politics, little girls matter” (Linda Janet Homes, 1). “A Girl’s Story” centers on a young, African-American girl named Rae Ann who is experiencing menstruation for the first time.
Reviews of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* were mixed. Ruby Dee, the actress and social activist, highly praised the collection in the *Amsterdam News*: Bambara “writes like a fine poet who makes every word count because there’s so much to say” (Deck 19). On the other hand, Robie Macauley, in reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, saw Bambara’s verbal dexterity as a flaw: “Some of the stories fail just because there is too much verbal energy, too much restless pursuit of random anecdote” (19). He did, however, have much praise for the title story and for “witchbird” whose central characters he assessed as ‘shrewd, cat-smart, and at the same time both sentimental and humane’ (19). The reviewer for *Choice* felt the first two stories in the collection, “The Organizer’s Wife” and “The Apprentice”, did not fulfil the promise of good character development: “Instead, the stories become tiresome with the excessive and heavy-handed effort to reproduce the black idiom. Furthermore, the reader seldom can determine where he is in time or place. The tale from whence the title comes is perhaps most frustrating in this regard” (19). Mary Helen Washington extolled two of Bambara’s stories, “Medley”, and “Witchbird”, as excellent dramatizations of the contemporary black American woman; however, she criticised all of the other stories for displaying too much political ideology: “The trouble with deliberately creating models is that they slip all too easily out of character (who they are) into being mouthpieces for the writer’s ideology (who the writer would like them to be). It’s not that politics does not belong in the realm of art, but that some of the models Bambara offers are too predictable (e.g. Naomi in “The Apprentice”) (19). A host of reviewers, journalists, newspapers, essayists expressed their views on the collection. Beverly Guy-Sheftall asked Bambara in her interview whether she was really pleased with the reviews of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*. Bambara answered:

All of the reviews have been very favourable. Some have been quite cogent and favourable. Some have been stupid and favourable. I found the *First World* review that was in the *Chicago Tribune* by Bruce Allen critically constructive. It focused on the flaws and the faults of the book and I found it very helpful. The piece that Ruby Dee
wrote ... I found the most moving in the sense that she makes highly particular the public and personal values. It just had me in tears. It helped me to answer some of the questions one always has in one’s mind while writing: whether it works, what doesn’t work to what degree is it overdone, to what degree is it too understand, questions of that sort. The Ruby Dee piece was Somp’n, honey. (Guy-Sheftall 9)

Bambara has long been admired for her stories. “Temperamentally, I move toward the short story”, she has said, defining herself, like her protagonist Hazel Parker, as “a sprinter rather than a long distance runner” (Guy-Sheftall 7). What she meant was that the short story should be short enough. As compared to Gorilla, My Love, the stories of the second collection are longer. In several of interviews, she has repeatedly stated about the length of the story. She says, “... the six page story is the gem” (7). With regard to the second collection, The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, she expressed her unhappiness over the length of the stories by saying “Most of these stories are too sprawling and hairy for my taste, although I’m very pleased, feel perfectly fine about them as pieces. But as stories they’re too damn long and dense” (7).

In respect of characterization, it is to be noted that Bambara has drawn characters who are adolescents and old people, mostly female. In Gorilla, My Love, one notices that the focus is on the adolescents who are adjusting to the perceptions of their world and keeping their sense of individuality. Commenting on the characters of Bambara, Susan Willis says that the characters in Gorilla, My Love “are sharply defined, but the notion of the individual is not problematized” (141). In stories like “Raymond’s Run” and “Gorilla, My Love”, the evocation of the individual is the strongest, and these stories are narrated by the first person. These stories define resourceful, witty and courageous young girls. According to Lois F. Lyles, “Bambara’s stories reveal characters who seek to be transformed during the revolutionary period so that they may be ready for the new order. The analogy that comes most readily to mind is that of the “born again” Christian, the believer who lives an exemplary life in order to be ready for the New Jerusalem. Although a
revolutionary seeks a regeneration of secular, not of spiritual, existence, the revolutionaries in Bambara’s stories display a fervour about their causes commensurate with the fervour of the devout” (52). Lyles further adds that the characters in The Sea Birds Are Alive are “militants ... live in a state of readiness for social and political upheaval. They live in expectation of a time when poverty of pocket and spirit will disappear, so they attempt to create genuine sisterhood and brotherhood among their people. These are characters with eyes fixed on apocalypse” (52). Ruth Elizabeth Burks echoes the similar opinion when she says that “the winners ... are the activists who are totally integrated into the community and who work tirelessly and endlessly to coalesce the people so their combined energies can defeat the oppressors” (Burks, 22). She further states that “Food imagery dominates these stories, as does the need to ‘feed the people’; food assumes a symbolic role, supplying both the physical and the spiritual sustenance the people need if they are to succeed in their struggle” (22). Bambara in her novel The Salt Eaters goes a step further and ‘presents a crowd of characters, isolated from one another, unconscious or forgetful of their personal, communal and historical connections, and she moves easily among them, looking and listening from different angles, at different levels, gathering evidence for a vision of renewed solidarity ...” (Susan Lardner 34).

Another remarkable difference between the characters of Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive is that the characters of Gorilla, My Love, have begun to think in terms of “me”. Most of the stories in The Sea Birds Are Still Alive are stories of people being drawn together, not of people being torn apart. Most of the characters have begun to think in terms of “we”, instead of “me”.

In respect of dialect used in both the collections, it is to be noted that critics have appreciated Bambara’s ear for the urban African American speech of her female protagonists/narrators – a voice that only frequently had been captured so accurately. Nancy Hargrove, in an essay in The Southern Quarterly, writes that “one is immediately struck by ... her faithful reproduction of black dialect. Her first-person narrators speak
conversationally and authentically” (12). Anne Tyler echoes the similar opinion in her essay “At the Still Center of a Dream” (1980): “As in Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive ..., what pulls us along is the language of its characters, which is startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note. Everything these people say, you feel, ordinary, real-life people are saying right now on any street corner ....” (33). In her another essay, “Farewell to the story as Imperiled Species” (1977), Anne Tyler writes on Bambara’s dialect and style of writing. She writes: “Miss Bambara writes with a marvelous vitality; her style, which draws its bite and verve from everyday black speech, comes close to poetry. But if you want to give [The Sea Birds Are Still Alive] the attention it deserves, you ought to wait a week between stories. Taken as a group, they seem too dense and clamorous. Taken one by one, they positively sing” (Tyler, 33). With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the characters such as Virginia, Naomi, Lacey, Sweet Pea, Aisha, Dada Bibi, Honey, Bertha, Mary, Piper/Obatale, to name a few, who struggle for liberation.

1.20.1 Bambara explores the theme of emerging consciousness on an individual basis in “The Organizer’s Wife”, from The Sea Birds Are Still Alive.

In “The Organizer’s Wife”, Virginia is transformed as a result of her participation in a Community Organization. The story is called “The Organizer’s Wife” because in the beginning Virginia very much just wishes to be the wife of Graham, the lead organizer. However, her decisive action and transformation place her at the center of the story. The title “The Organizer’s Wife” then becomes ironic because it both questions and captures the practice of referring to women by their husband’s name. The title reappropriates this misnaming by placing Virginia as the subject of the story and highlights her change. Virginia is called “Gin’ by the community members. Gin is an uneducated local girl who seeks above all to flee her stagnant home town. She marries the local organiser, Graham, who is attempting to lead the rural community in a land rights campaign. The local farmers have been manipulated and intimidated into underselling their land to developers.
Though Graham is invested in the campaign it is Virginia’s hope that he will soon leave the Community, taking her with him. Graham runs a community school on land leased to the organization by the local church. Virginia takes a literacy class at the Freedom School but, having learned quickly, she begins to help teach. The church sells the land that the Community Organization occupied and hoped to later buy with the pastor having helped to trump up the charges that lead to Graham’s imprisonment. The local farmers, who had thus far been dependent on Graham to organize them, use their local connections to arrange to have the paperwork held up to sell the land.

At the climax of the story Virginia, hearing of the preacher’s treachery, confronts him at the church and beats him with a ruler until he scampers away. Virginia’s use of a ruler to reprimand the preacher is symbolic of the important role of education as a tool of liberation. It also speaks to a fundamental shifting of roles. Virginia takes the role of the teacher by wielding the ruler. She refuses to bow to the pastor’s traditional role as a community leader. This church is symbolic of many such establishments which misuse their moral authority by siding with those who do not have the Community’s best interests in mind in order to gain respectability with Whites. This confrontation is a pivotal point for Virginia, who thus far only wanted to leave the town and its problems. She begins to see the community’s problems as her own and take responsibility for them as opposed to simply wanting to flee them for a utopian big city. She is transformed in the story. She becomes strong. She usually goes to the jail to visit Graham sobbing uncontrollably but this time she goes composed and in control to present bail money. Virginia’s journey is from a naive country girl to a community organizer. This shift is more a rite of passage for Gin than motherhood, which only bears a passing reference in the novel. This metamorphosis involves her change from a victim into a leader who subaverages her own wants to the needs of the community.

1.20.2 In order to stress the theme of the story, Bambara is in habit of using symbols which are more suggestive than they are mere words. While pointing out various symbols used in the story, Lois F. Lyles, in her essay
“Time, Motion, Sound and Fury in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*” (1992) highlights the symbols of “The Can” and ‘a white worm” (5).

Graham has a tobacco tin from which he customarily offers the neighbouring farmers tobacco. The can is red and pictures a “boy in shiny green astride an iron horse. It was Graham’s habit, when offering a smoke, to spin some tale or other about, the boy on the indestructible horse, a tale the smoker would finish. The point was always the same – the courage of the youth, the hope of the future” (5). The can signifies both Graham’s solidarity with the people and the need for struggling to bring a future of freedom to fruition. The can has the black nationalist colours; red (for blood), black (for the people), and green (for land). Thus it symbolizes the “new Africa” the co-op which people are building through the struggle to own and control their own land and thereby control their own lives.

The snake in this garden of black hopes is a white one. As the story opens, Virginia looks at her garden, which has been neglected since her husband’s arrest for inciting to riot. She notices that her corn is “bent ... grit-land with neglect ... she saw a white worm work its way into the once-silky tufts turned straw, then disappear” (5). The white worm (figuratively, the serpent, the Devil) is the white man who has renounced his humanity in order to turn a profit from land which a black man would use for subsistence.

1.20.3 Bambara received mixed reactions to “The Organizer’s Wife”. There were women who felt that the title was an insult, and other readers who said they would have liked to see Virginia leave town and her child die to show that she could not live or raise a child under a system which had separated her from Graham. In response to these suggestions Bambara argued, “what kind of a message would that have been? ‘The Organizer’s Wife’, written in 1975 and set in 1975, is a love story, layer after layer. Lovers and combatants are not defeated. That is the message of that story, the theme of the entire collection, the wisdom that gets me up in the morning, honored to be here. It is a usable truth” (Deck, 18).

1.21 According to Susan Willis, in the story “The Apprentice”, Bambara “replaces the biological mother-child relationship with the learning and caring
relationship between a middle-aged community organizer and her young apprentice. As she portrays them, the two characters come to embody the deepest dilemma Bambara faces as a writer – namely, how to bridge the gap between sixties activism and post-Vietnam uncertainty” (151-152). Like Virginia who comes to realise she must change and be a part of struggle in “The Organizer’s Wife”, Naomi makes her personal sacrifices to nurture and prepare the people for the struggle ahead.

The story – “The Apprentice” – opens with a bald question “Is that a brother?” (24). In this story the “brother” referred to by Naomi is a black man, stopped on suspicion of car theft, who is being body-searched by a policeman. Naomi is an indefatigable community organizer. She is not young, as might be expected; she is ‘salt and pepperish in the bush” (26). Her collective feeds needy people and has a police watch to help forestall police brutality. She loves the masses and wants to spur them on to revolution; she dreams of how ideal people would be, once freed of their oppressors. Naomi’s statement, “It’s just a matter of time, time and work ... cause the revolution is here” (34) implies that effort must be exerted so that the revolution can happen; yet, paradoxically, the revolution is happening. The confusion of present with future in Naomi’s thinking suggests that working to create a revolution means immediate apprehension of revolution. Like the two teachers from a black “freedom school”, Naomi of “The Apprentice” strives to bring the future to life now. In contrast to Naomi, the young apprentice is a doubter : “What have I seen but junkies noddin in the alley, dudes steppin in my window to rip me off, folks that’d kill God for a quarter” (33). It is not that Naomi overlooks grim social reality, but from her point of view the revolution is at hand. Political work, particularly at a time of great social misery and oppression, is revolutionary. In contrast, the apprentice conceptualizes the revolution as a single, verifiable moment : the moment of transformation, which obviously has not yet occurred and so must be somewhere in the future. The difference between the two versions of revolution is precisely the difference between the politics of the sixties, which saw every demonstration, every countercultural gesture, as part of an ongoing
revolution, and the eighties, which as a time of transition and dismay, can at best posit the revolution somewhere around the corner.

The three stories – “The Organizer’s Wife”, “The Apprentice”, and “Broken Field Running” which precede ‘Sea Birds” are about blacks who – though not involved in violent conflict with the government, which they perceive as oppressive – await this conflict. The rapid space of “The apprentice”, “Broken Field Running” and “The Long Night” is a reminder that the person who demands “revolution in my lifetime” (34) incessantly works toward that goal. It is no accident that a common synonym for the black civil rights struggle during its heyday was “The Movement”. A related expression ‘to move on” meant to act upon, to confront, or even to deal violently with an enemy.

“The Apprentice” provides an important point of comparison with The Salt Eaters both for its definition of a mutual relationship between the organizer and the community, which in the novel will no longer obtain, and for the depiction of the community itself as a cohesive unit. Whereas The Salt Eaters shows the space of the community as a loosely defined topography, which includes a number of varied autonomous zones – the bus, the infirmary, the cafe – “The Apprentice” describes a heterogeneous collectivity, whose focal points are equally representative of the whole and important for the reproduction of social life. As Naomi and her young disciple travel from old folks home to the black lodge to the drive-in restaurant, their movement defines the extent of the community and binds its members together even as their conversations with retired people, brother Decker, and short-order cooks give shape to the community’s future aspirations. To conclude with the words of Billye Raushanah Smith, “The story does not end with the narrator having accepted the tolls of organizing nor by extolling the virtues of the outcome of struggle despite the fatigue. Like The Salt Eaters, “The Apprentice” ends with fatigue; the tension is not resolved” (63).

1.22 The work of revolution was continued in the next story “Broken Field Running”. Now the characters are not Naomi and the apprentice, but Dada Lucey and Ndugu Jason. Of ten stories of the collection, The Sea Birds Are
Still Alive, “Broken Field Running” is longer one. The title “Broken Field Running” implies the importance of motion. The story describes a black urban setting, which at one time probably presented an image of social cohesion (small shops and walk-up flats, bars and restaurants) but now, with the help of corporate and government investment, has become an architectural and social hodge-podge, where zones of “renewal” interrupt the once-familiar neighbourhood. “Broken Field Running” is set in the black ghetto of Cleveland, in winter, and the cold and snow create a harsh environment symbolic of the bitterness and omnipresence of white domination. The teachers and students of the story anticipate a postrevolutionary society devoid of bitterness because there will be no rich people and no poor people only free people. The teachers have names (Dada Lucey and Ndugu Jason) which are part African, part Western. These names suggest the transitional status of the adults, who were brought up in a Western tradition but who have embraced, at maturity, African ways. Some of the children at the school have Western names, a couple (Malaika and Kwane), non-Western. The non-Western names represent the hope that a new generation can be reared in non-Western ways. The two teachers, who, while escorting a group of young students to their homes, transverse the black neighbourhood commenting on its deformation. Whereas the museum represents government intervention in its positive form, the PAL discount store and windowless bank facade demonstrate the monstrosities of corporate colonization. So, too, the architecture of the projects provides ample space for “drug-dealers”, “take-off artists”, “bullies” and “vipers” (45), while boxing in an fragmenting the residents, denying them – particularly their children – the space for fulfillment and play. As bad as the housing projects are, the school, an out-and-out prison, is worse:

Cement grounds, hard, cold, treeless, shadowless, no hiding places or clustering places for plotting and scheming or just getting together. The building squats on an angle, as though snubbing the rest of the neighbourhood, giving a cold shoulder, isolating itself, separating its inmates from the rest of the folks. (64-65)
It is a crime that poor people like those of “Broken Field Running” are forced to live in prison-like buildings, send their children to prison-like schools, shop in prison-like stores, and defend themselves both against a hostile white world and against their own black neighbours who steal from and assault them. Bambara’s revolutionary teachers hope to bring the utopian future into being. As one of the children puts it,

We won’t mind the snow and the wind then, ... cause everybody’ll have warm clothes and we’ll all trust each other and can stop anybody’s house for hot chocolate cause won’t nobody be scared or selfish. Won’t even be locks on the doors. And every sister will be my mother. (69)

When the same child goes on to ask, “will the new time come soon?”, her teacher is able to respond, “It’s here already .... Because the new people, the new commitment, the new way is already here” (69). Jason assures Malaika that the new era which she awaits is happening “in our life time”. Though Jason uses the phrase “in our lifetime” a few times, he never prefaces the expression with the word “revolution”. He does not need to. The idea “revolution in our Time” is no deeply imprinted on the minds of all connected with his school that “revolution” is heard mentally as part of the slogan though the word is never said. For the freedom-school teachers and students, revolution, the future condition, is present existence.

At the end of the story, there is the description of circular movement. Jason whirls “around on his heel like he’s executing a new figure” (69). Malaika, using her arms as wings, glides around the teachers, who “stay put till she comes full circle” (67). The circle is an image of revolution, a complete turn in law, behaviour, custom and thought.

“Broken Field Running” shows a new generation being educated in communal values. The young, trained in liberation schools, will be the ones to single-mindedly carry out black nationalist goals. Their elders, like Dada Lacey, may tire of battling for freedom, but the young have the drive to pull
the enervated through. The story concludes with Malaiika and Ndugu Jason dragging the tired Dada Lacey along to Jason’s home.

1.23 The first three stories – “The Organizer’s Wife”, “The Apprentice”, and “Broken Field Running” which precede “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” are about the blacks who – though not involved in violent conflict with the government which they perceive as oppressive – await this conflict. However, the oppressed people depicted in “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” are actually involved in a revolutionary struggle. The short story aims at the importance of awakening political consciousness. A political consciousness is the first battle site in revolution because without a politicized consciousness it is impossible to fight for self-determination.

In the story “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” the government newspaper is its primary means of spreading propaganda. The paper lies, in attempts to minimise the revolution and spread its ideals. An old woman spits “beetle juice” on the paper in disgust as a form of silent resistance. Countering propaganda through consciousness building is an important issue, as it forms the foundation for a revolutionary writer. Literature as a part of revolution operates as a tool to raise consciousness. In the story, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* because of the potential in everyone to transform and became an agent for change.

The short story, “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, takes place on a boat in a militarized South East Asian country, presumably Vietnam. The backdrop of the story is conversations concerning rebel forces, student resistance, informants, attacks, government retaliation and greedy landlords. The main character is a revolutionary who aids largely through sharing traditional knowledge and contributing labour. She tells the young soldiers of the old ways of capturing enemies at sea by placing poles in the sea floor that will entangle foreign ships. She cooks for the freedom fighters, carries arms, bails the herbal concoction for their poison arrows, sharpens arrow heads and fills quivers, and prays for their victory. Her contribution reinforces traditional knowledge, and opposes cultural alienation and assimilation as preached by Western Imperialism. She is later captured. Although government soldiers
torture her for information about revolutionary activities, she does not betray her comrades. When she is released from prison, one of the guards gives her a loaf of bread. She assumes it is poisonous and gives the bread to her daughter to throw at seagulls. The seagulls, however, do not die. They instead turn vicious when the child stops feeding them and begin to attack the girl. The soldier, though a tool of the government, demonstrated compassion and perhaps a latent sympathy for the revolutionary cause by giving the woman nourishment.

The theme that all people are redeemable resurfaces when the boat docks. The little boy who helps the woman and her daughter carry their luggage is a spy for the government. He reports suspicious behaviour for money to buy food. He has no ill will and in fact may not have any idea of the consequences of what he is doing. He really wants to be a part of a family, he thinks, as he walks in between old woman and girl carrying their bags. The old woman is worried about the boy because he is sick. She knows he is a spy but she believes he has a future. She is interested in investing in the boy despite his misdeeds because of his human potential. She is not interested in using him or giving him scraps like the government he reports to. She is instead interested in teaching him skills that will both help him to develop his capabilities and to help his people. The woman reports that the elders of the struggle taught her that everyone matters. Revolution gives people the chance to change.

Ruth Elizabeth Burks, in her essay, “From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language” (1984) highly regards this title story of the collection:

Yet the most exceptional story in this collection, I feel, is “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, its title story. In it Bambara displays her range of subject and style. Both omniscient and omnipotent, she describes the innermost thoughts and feelings of men, women, and children, of nondelineated race, as they take a forced boat trip to a nondesignated place. (56)
Lois, F. Lyles, in her essay “Time, Motion, Sound and Fury in The Sea Birds Are Still Alive” (1992) comments on the underlying theme of the stories of the collection by saying “One of the most arresting features of the short stories in Toni Cade Bambara’s The Sea Birds Are Still Alive is their revolutionary thrust. ... The revolution as a literal present, rather than the present-experienced as-future, is illustrated by “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, a story which has a central position and a central importance in the collection (as might be inferred from the use of the story’s title as a title for the entire work” (137). Lyles further comments on the use of symbolism in the story. “Sea Birds” are the oppressed people who are actually involved in a revolutionary struggle. The word “alive” in the story’s title has a powerful symbolism: in this world of carnage, where the common folk have been dying for generations in the attempt to rid themselves of a series of colonizers, the revolution will ultimately succeed and guarantee life where death has reigned omnipotent. “Sea Birds” suggests a link between the African-American freedom movement and the worldwide movement of people of color fighting capitalism and imperialism. If Asians, like the Cubans mentioned in “The Apprentice” can dare to work for their liberation, blacks, too, have this choice—this duty.

To conclude with the words of Deck: “The emphasis in the story is on resistance rather than on despair, and it dramatises Bambara’s belief in ‘the power of words, of utterances’ to nourish one through trying situations” (19).

1.24 “The Long Night”, the fifth story in the collection, follows “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, a tale of the courage and persistence of Asian revolutionaries. The story is written in the third-person past tense, describing one woman’s vigil during a race riot as the police relentlessly massacre the people.

“The Long Night” which describes a police raid on the headquarters of black revolutionaries, opens with a succession of noises. The first sentence of the story is, “It whistled past her, ricocheted off the metal hamper and slammed into the radiator pipe, banging the door ajar” (94). The violence of the police is the jolt needed to catalyze people’s awareness. The story begins
with the forced entry of the police into a revolutionary’s home as she hides in the bathtub. She is terrified, because she thinks they seek to arrest her for her political group’s militant activities. In the past the armed group has assaulted a pesticide plant, a police precinct, and has made a botched attempt to free student political prisoners. The woman in the apartment is terrified and near panic. She imagines her torture and plots her escape, mentally taking stock of the guns she has hidden throughout her home. The actual motive of the police break in is to procure a mop and bucket to clean up the blood from a botched murder they have committed. The police bang on several doors, scaring and intruding on many of the community members. The police are likened to burglars: One woman pleads as they bang on the door, “please [go do not hurt us] we have kids in here” (100). After the police leave the scene of their crime, the people descend to look at the pool of blood on the sidewalk that the organizer’s mop could not sop up. Witnessing this evidence of crime against their community, the people begin to emerge into clarity:

The people would be emerging from the dark of their places. ... And their brains, true to their tropism, would stretch the whole body up to the light, generating new food out of the old staple wisdoms. And they would look at each other as if for the first time and wonder, who is this one and that one. And she would join the circle gathered round the ancient stains in the street. And someone would whisper, and who are you. And who are you. And who are we. And they would tell each other in a language that had evolved, not by magic, in the caves. (102)

The violence jolts the people out of their apathy. The episode leads them to bond together, to take responsibility for one another and their Community. This new found responsibility is symbolised in their acquainting themselves with each other, countering the anonymity that can come with living in large cities. This anonymity can lead to minimizing a wrong done to someone else because it does not directly affect them. This individuality is classified as darkness in the story and growing consciousness and collectivity is moving toward light. The emerging consciousness involves becoming each other’s keepers.
1.25 The Significance of the First Five Stories:

Of ten stories of the collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, the first five – “The Organizer’s Wife”, “The Apprentice”, “Broken Field Running”, “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, and “The Long Night” – deal with the relationship between the revolutionary leader and the community. The characters seek to be transformed during the revolutionary period so that they may be ready for the new order. Significantly, the family, which functioned in *Gorilla, My Love* as the displayed representation of the black community, is abandoned – often thrown into question – while the notion of a collectivity expands into the community at large: the revolutionary band, the neighbourhood or small town. The rapid pace of “The Apprentice”, “Broken Field Running”, and “The Long Night” is a reminder that the person who demands “revolution in my life time” incessantly works toward that goal. It is no accident that a common synonym for the black civil rights struggle during its heyday was “The Movement”. A related expression, “to move on” meant to act upon, to confront, or even to deal violently with an enemy. The remaining five stories in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* focus on the relationship between Afro-American men and women.

1.26 Mary Helen Washington “extolled two of Bambara’s stories, “Medley”, and “Witchbird”, as excellent dramatizations of the contemporary black American woman” (Deck, 19). Three of Bambara’s short stories “Gorilla, My Love”, “Medley”, and “Witchbird” have been adapted to film. Bambara herself said, “My Story”, “Medley” could not have been written by a brother, nor could “A Tender Man” have been written by a white woman. Those two stories are very much cut on the bias, so to speak, by a seam-stress on the inside of the cloth” (Tate, 14-15). In an 1982 taped interview with Kay Bonetti of the American Audit Prose Library, Bambara said, “When I look back at my work with any little distance the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage.” Both are apparent in most of her works. In “Medley”, for example, we see the laughter shared by women sipping drinks together as well as the frustrations felt by Sweet Pea, the main character, when the men
around her act as if her opinion is meaningless. A young feminist who is dedicated to her dream of building a home for herself and her daughter, Sweet Pea, like many nascent feminists at the time, feels uncomfortable “neglecting” or leaving behind the man in her life. Bambara knew that in order to thrive – not just survive – women would need to learn how to adapt to society’s ever-changing rhythms without sacrificing their own identities in the process. “Medley” combines Bambara’s food imagery with an animal imagery begun in *Gorilla, My Love*. It is not just the cantaloupe rinds piled up in the sink with the dirty dishes, which she confronts when she returns from a trip to make the money she needs to have her daughter come live with her, but the dog, who displaced Larry’s best friend when Larry realized that the place was just not big enough for the four of them, that makes her know she was sung her last song with Larry. In an anthropomorphic gesture, she kicks the dog, and in so doing says goodbye to Larry, who could hit all the right notes in the shower, but was the only musician she had ever heard who could not play on key with a group. Bambara’s language peaks and riffs:

> Then I was off again and lost Larry somewhere down there doing scales, sound like. And he went back to that first supporting line that had drove me up into the Andes. ... But I was elsewhere and liked it out there and ignored the fact that he was aiming for a wind-up of “I Love You More Today Than Yesterday.” ... not even knowing what song each other was doing, we finished up together just as the water turned cold. (123-124)

Her off notes and her half notes meet and croon the melody of “Medley”.

In “Medley” we can see resemblances between the form of the story and the improvisations of modern jazz. But this is fiction, not a musical medley, and as an accomplished writer, Bambara does respond to, and comment upon, the American realist tradition in fiction and certain basic expectations and practices of contemporary story telling.

1.27 “A Tender Man”:

The tender man is one who is accountable to women and children. The use of the phrase “a tender man” places the story “A Tender Man” in
conversation with many of Bambara’s other works. The phrase occurs in “The Johnson Girls”, the last story of the collection, *Gorilla, My Love*. In “The Johnson Girls” when the women are discussing different categories of men, they agree that the most important type is the tender man. Sugar expresses this sentiment:

> A tender man who can tend to your tenderest needs. May be it means painting your room a dumb shade of orange.... Or holding your head while you heave your insides out into the toilet. ... Or maybe it’s just spoon-feeding you and putting on your pink angora socks and rubbin your tired feet. (168-169)

Subsequently, the phrase occurs in “Baby’s Breath” and *The Salt Eaters*. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see the story “A Tender Man”.

The main theme of “A Tender Man” is a man’s responsibility for the children that he has fathered. This is the only story told from a man’s perspective. The main character Cliff is a Vietnam veteran turned liberal sociology professor. He impregnated a white woman then married her before leaving for the war. When the marriage does not work out, in fleeing a dysfunctional marriage he abandoned his child. When his ex-wife breaks down, a mutual acquaintance, Aisha, offers to adopt the daughter. Aisha, a very straightforward black woman, whom coincidentally he has been dating, works in a community health clinic. The story takes place in the dreary, bureaucratic clinic and at the Indian restaurant where Aisha and Cliff talk. Like most of Bambara’s stories the plot line is not linear. “A Tender Man” involves shifts back and forth in time. The events of past and present life of Cliff are narrated. At the end of the story Cliff decides to take the custody of the child. He would like to take the responsibility of his child and would be a good father, a tender man.

The tender man is one who is accountable to women and children. In “A Tender Man” Cliff becomes accountable over time. The Johnson girls dream of a tender man and Obie from *The Salt Eaters*, recast as Louis from “Baby’s Breath”, as tender men are already accountable through their partners
but irresponsible in other ways. The significance that Cliff wants to be a tender man is not lost on Aisha. She begins to give Cliff another chance despite his previous irresponsible behaviour towards his child. As a tender man Cliff counters macho stereotypes. He can fulfil his commitments as both a father and a partner and reclaim his manhood from the specter of his own misdeeds, those of his wayward father, and from his aunts who overwhelm him with their continual warnings against being a “no good nigger.” He can also try to redress his inattention to his daughter, who, like Rae Ann in “A Girl’s Story”, as a child is the party most affected when adults do not fulfil their obligations.

1.28 “A Girl’s Story”:

The nuclear family is at the centre of two stories, namely, “A Girl’s Story” and “A Tender Man.” Bambara criticises male domination of the nuclear family and demonstrates the importance of developing child-rearing institutions in the community. “A Tender Man” explores black male child abandonment. “A Girl’s Story” focuses on a young girl’s first menstruation. The story demonstrates how male dominated ideas about women’s sexuality penetrate and inform the way women relate to their daughters, even in situations where no man is in the home. Commenting on the underlying idea of the story, Susan Willis observes: “‘A Girl’s Story’ is a parable depicting the brutality of mothering in a male-dominated society” (42). The story describes the distressing outcome when a grandmother fails to educate a young girl about the changes that would take place in her body during puberty. When the story begins, Rae Ann thinks she is bleeding to death. She does not know that it is the start of her menstrual cycle, something no one had told her about. She lives with her brother Hurace and her Grandmother, M’Dear. Her grandmother, M’Dear, is her guardian and, like many older generation, women did not teach her about menstruation. In this environment, they do not speak of such things. Rae Ann is terrified of the blood that keeps coming out of her and uses towels, tissues, and other methods to try to stop it. At the beginning she is hoisting her hips up toward a wall, thinking it would go back in. She becomes so frightened that she thinks of going to the centre,
where Dada Bibi is, and asking for help. Throughout this ordeal Rae Ann longs for Dada Bibi, the teacher at the Community Center who loves all the neighbourhood children unconditionally. Dada Bibi teaches them about pride in self and race and about history. She becomes too afraid to, thinking she would only bleed to death on the way. Rae Ann starts to think of her situation as a punishment and of her dead mother who bled to death. When Horace came home and wanted to use the bathroom, he yells at her to come out. After she refuses him, he calls on M’Dear who then jumps to the conclusion that Rae Ann had attempted an abortion like her mother. Rae Ann is confused, not knowing what an abortion is, let alone to tell her grandmother otherwise. When M’Dear finally sees her and understands that it was only her period, she sits her down on newspaper in her room, leaving her with a package. The story ends with this scene and Rae Ann thinks she has done something horrible. M’Dear does not explain anything to her, just leaves a package of products and instructions for Rae Ann to figure out on her own.

In “A Girl’s Story” M’Dear did not fulfill her responsibility to Rae Ann by not teaching her about menstruation. As a consequence, Rae Ann endures shame and confusion. Rae Ann’s family is prepared for her to have had an illegal abortion but do not teach her about her body and how to prevent pregnancy. M’Dear is prepared to hand out whipping but not explanations. This gap in her family’s affection and information Rae Ann knows can be filled by Dada Bibi at the Community Center. Commenting on the message of the story, Billye Raushanath Smith observes:

Here, Bambara suggests that the revolution can fill in gaps in the family unit. Dada Bibi is a replacement mother for Rae Ann and the Community Center replaces outdated moral codes with more holistic ones. With such a fumbled job of accountability it is no wonder that at the end of the story Rae Ann is still confused at what it means to live for the people. She knows that she does not want to die for the people but does not actually know what to do to help free Blacks. Dada Bibi helps her to brainstorm what she can do to help the cause of liberation and be accountable to her Community. (53)
In conclusion it is to be noted that Bambara puts young girls at the center of her stories where they take active roles, rather than the typical passivity that is expected of them. Rae Ann is active in her search for answers to life questions, particularly from Dada Bibi’s stories and advice. She thinks and acts through her situation, rather than becoming paralysed by fear.

1.29 “Witchbird”:

Like Ms. Hazel in “My Man Bovanne”, Honey, the main character from “Witchbird” fights having her identity dichotomized. The story follows her aversion to being entrapped in stereotypical “mammy” roles as both an actress and a woman. The tale ends with her push toward self-definition. She claims that she will write new scripts and songs for Black women that recognize the whole of their beings.

In the beginning of the story, we are given Honey’s dream. Honey happens to see a roguish Black “witchbird” figure. She is lured by a motorcycle, then a train in order to deliver a change of space. She refuses him, she does not trust him. He tries to lure her away with him using a pair of golden tasseled house shoes, which are a sign of ‘mammyfiscation’. Honey’s refusal of the witchbird’s offer signifies her decision to take control of her life, not to be seduced or victimized away from reality, which is that she is a middle aged African American actress facing limited options but prepared to resist.

Honey, first of all, tired of her vain manager, Heywood, who is perhaps the witchbird in human form, who brings his ex-women to her house to board, cry the blues, without paying the rent. He also seeks to limit her to the role of a sex-less mammy figure. She says of Heywood: “he makes me feel more mother or older sister, though he four months to the day older than me. He’s got me bagged somehow. Put me in a bag when I was not looking. Folks be sneaky with their scenarios and secret casting” (183).

Using Honey as a “mammy”, he deposits his heart-broken ex-girl friends at her house for her to nurse. She is tired of being taken for granted as a depository for his indiscretions. She wants the women to go so she can have
peace. Second of all, she is tired of stereotypical roles for Black women. She is often cast as a mammy and tells of trying to retain her integrity while doing those roles. Once she played the part with a Kente cloth apron, the only change she could make in the costume. She wants to work up a new script to free up Black women who have been stereotyped. She wants to write them a new song. These women call to her, driving her crazy with the weight of all the silences. The stories of real life Black women like the Voodoo Quens, Maroon Guerillas, and Seminole women swim in her head how, hindering for escape, for her to write their stories.

Honey returns home from her latest production in New York not just fatigued but “zombie-like”, with caked-on white make-up and a wig, which her beautician refers to as ‘the hair of a deal white woman” (181). She is tired from the weight of both the limitations of her present roles and the sisters’ stories which have yet to find voice. Her healing begins at the beauty parlour, a gendered space, with a laying on of hands as the beautician scratches her dandruff and rubs hot oil into her scalp. The woman then start the ritual of sharing their stories, cracking jokes, and telling cautionary tales. Among them are anecdotes about Heywood who seeks to “mamify” her, “Like you ain’t got nuthin’ better to do with ya tits but wet-nurse his girls” (181). Bertha says, “illuminating Heywood’s inclination to rob Honey of her sexuality in order to use her to mother his ex-girlfriends. The women go on to talk about a Sister who is trying to support her man through a drug addiction. The stories become too much to bear and the heretofore stalwart Honey starts to cry and finally to talk. She says that she knows that she will talk herself hoarse and will not be able to sing later” (186). In her discussion of playing mammies on stage and in her personal life Honey expresses the conflicting relationship between her outside, performed self and the protected, sacred, self. Here she has decided not to perform but to speak her truth to her circle of women friends who can affirm her words and, in turn, her life. They are all the type of women whose lives she wants to write about in her song.
1.30 “Christmas Eve At Johnson’s Drugs N Goods”:

“Christmas Eve At Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” is the closing story of the collection. The story is framed by the consciousness of a teenage daughter. The story is voiced in the first person – with the singular “I” drawing its energy and power from an implied “We” of Community. The story focuses on Candy, a teenage daughter, who realizes that her father, now that he has remarried following his divorce from her mother, will not be coming to spend Christmas with her. Candy feels, “I write for a whole hour in my diary trying to connect with the future me and trying not to hear my daddy snoring” (198). This passage suggests how it is reminiscent of the Hazel stories in Gorilla, My Love, while it encompasses the overt political themes more characteristic of The Sea Birds Are Still Alive.

Candy, the first narrator, who lives with her aunt and uncle since her actress mother is on the road, is at a threshold in her life, poised between childhood and adulthood and between political naivete and awareness. Familiar techniques in the story include an anecdotal or improvisational structure and hyperbolic, “signifying” dialogues and descriptions. Candy and her coworkers at Johnson’s drugs store while away the last working hour on Christmas Eve by engaging with two colourful shoppers, “vandevillain” actresses. Candy admires these women, dressed in fur coats and verbally acute, but when they snub Obatale, the young man who works in the drug department, she charges her evaluation. Meanwhile, Candy’s thoughts combine memories of her father, who is remarried and settled in another city, with recent doings in the drugstore. As she continues to hope that her father will visit her this holiday, she remembers how on her birthday last year they wordlessly said good night, squeezing each other’s hands; she regrets that she did not speak the words of understanding and forgiveness that she was feeling – of how she knew “he feeling bad about moving away and all, but what can he do, he got a life to lead. Just like Mama got her life to lead. Just like I got my life to lead and ‘Il probably leave here myself one day and become an actress or a director” (196-197). Words that do get spoken become the “alchemy” of Candy’s growth, and this process is performed in the story in
the humorous/serious manner characteristic of Bambara’s fiction. Her aunt Harriet, who is always doing crossword puzzles (and whose crossword vocabulary gives Candy the word “alchemy”, clashes with the white druggist at Johnson’s (a man who reminds Candy of ‘Nazi youth”) because unlike the local healer, he refuses to explain the process he uses to make the drugs. A furious aunt Harriet digs “down deep into her crossword – puzzle words” calls the druggist ‘a bunch of choicest names” (199) and produces a line – “Medication without explanation is obscene” (199) that Candy and the other Johnson’s employees imitate extravagantly for a week. When they are looking for an aunt Harriet line to describe “the street riots in the sixties and so forth”, the “new dude in Drugs” suggests “Revolution without Transformation is Half-assessed” (200). This pithy statement lends Candy to make friends with Obatale, the “new dude”, to find out what books he reads and look them up herself. So on this Christmas Eve, when the well dressed and satirical shoppers make fun of the not-well-dressed Obatale, Candy makes a choice of which kind of person she wants to emulate and befriend. When he invites her to a Kwanzaa celebration she is apprehensive, because she does not completely understand it. Her decision to attend the event marks a turning point for her in the novel both personally and politically. Personally she decides to take her fate into her own hands and pursue her dreams despite her parents’ neglect and politically she turns toward nationalism, which is marked by her decision to go to the Kwanza celebration and to stop making fun of Obatale’s name. She confronts him, asking him to say it slowly and write it down so she can understand it. The community grounded in celebration of African heritage, will support Candy in ways that her family can no loner go, although her family has also contributed to the “alchemy” of her growing personal and social agency.

1.31 The Significance of the second collection, The Sea Birds Are Still Alive:

The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, Bambara’s second collection of short stories, was inspired by her travels to Cuba and Vietnam. The Sea Birds Are Still Alive departs from the small black community, to encompass a wider
geographical perspective. These stories take in blacks from across the country, as well as the women of Asia in the title story. The second collection emphasizes the centrality of Black women’s work in their families and communities, their role as Community Organizers, mentors, and the importance of building solidarity with other women. In the title story “The Sea Birds Are Still Alive”, a young girl and her mother flee on a boat during the war in Southeast Asia. ‘The Apprentice”, “Broken Field Running”, “The Organizer’s Wife”, and “Long Night” stress the need for community action.

The remaining five stories – “Medley”, “A Tender Man”, “Witchbird”, “A Girl’s Story”, and “Christmas Eve at Johnson’s Drugs N Goods” – focus on the relationship between Afro American men and women. Like the first collection of short stories, Gorilla, My Love, the second collection has received the most critical attention of the critics. Lois F. Lyles points out that the short stories of the second collection are about “revolution thrust.” As Lyles observes: ‘One of the most arresting features of the short stories in Toni Cade Bambara’s The Sea Birds Are Still Alive is their revolutionary thrust. The influence of the avenging Fury, revolution, upon the minds, hearts, and actions of the characters in the stories is manifested through the depiction of the characters’ sense of time and through the prominence of descriptions of sound and motion” (2). If Lyles points out the theme of ‘revolution thrust’, Ruth Elizabeth Burks traces the solidarity of the people. As she says, “Most of the stories in The Sea Birds are stories of people being drawn together, not of people being torn apart. Most of the characters have begun to think in terms of “we”, instead of “me” ... (22). Eleanor W. Traylor comments on Bambara’s prose style, particularly its jazz-like characteristics. To quote Traylor, “the improvising, stylizing, ramping, recreative method of the jazz composer is the formal method by which the narrative genius of Toni Cade Bambara evokes a usable past testing its values within an examined present moment while simultaneously exploring the re-creative and transformative possibilities of experience” (28). The reader is intimate with black speech and a colloquial black aesthetic.
1.32 Similarities and differences between *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*:

In her interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara made clear her volition of writing the two collections, *Gorilla, My Love*, and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*:

... How do we insure space for our children was a concern out of which the stories in the first collection, *Gorilla, My Love*, grew. ... Most of these stories are what I would call on-the-block, in-the-neighbourhood, back-glance pieces, for the most part. ... How do we sustain ourselves between the sixties and the eighties? Out of that concern some of the stories in the second collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, sprang. Stories like “Broken Field Running” and “Am I Spoiling You” also known as “the Apprentice” in other anthologies, speak directly to that issue. They are both on-the-block and larger-world-of-struggle pieces, very contemporary, and much less back-glance. (24)

*Gorilla, My Love* (1972) features stories from the point of view of Hazel, a young outspoken Black girl. The collection offers a glimpse into the personal relationships and lives of African-Americans, often through the use of first person narratives. Many of the characters in these stories speak in black dialect. The stories strongly nationalist in tone, emphasize family, accountability, and community. Bambara’s next book of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), is heavily influenced by her travels and her sociopolitical involvement with community groups and collective organizations. The tales in this collection take place in diverse geographical areas and center chiefly on communities instead of individuals.

In her two collections, Bambara told stories about African-Americans in the rural South and the urban North and of immigrants from the Carribbean. She depicted vibrant, though certainly not trouble-free, black communities whose residents were coming to terms with the changes in American society. In an 1982 taped interview with Kay Bonetti of the American Audio Prose Library, Bambara said, “When I look back at my work with any little distance the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the
tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage” (1). Both are apparent in most of her works.

Both the collections have certain similarities and certain differences. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see certain similarities in both the collections.

The first similarity that was pointed out by Anne Tyler is that of language of its characters. As Tyler observes: “As in Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive ..., what pulls us along is the language of its characters, which is startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note. Everything these people say, you feel, ordinary, real-life people are saying right now on any street corner” (1-2).

The second similarity is noted by Susan Lardner. According to her “the stories in Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, describing the lives of black people in the North and the South, could be more exactly typed as vignettes and significant anecdotes, although a few of them are fairly long” (34).

The third similarity is the reflection of various movements prevailing around Bambara. Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive trace the Civil Rights Movement in America from its inception, through its most powerful expression, to its loss of momentum. “My Man Bovanna”, the first story of Gorilla, My Love, gets its impetus from the Black power Movement, just beginning. The younger generation has begun to cast off its slave names for African ones.

Eleanor W. Traylor points out one more similarity and that is the central vision. According to her, “The central vision of both the short and long fiction fixes a view of ancestry as the single most important inquiry of personhood and of community life” (27). Finally, according to Barbara Di Bernard, ‘in her two collections of short stories, Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, Bambara shows us the possibilities for laughter and transformation by oppressed people, especially the Black community of which she is a part. Many of the narrators or central characters of her stories
are children – “tough little compassionate kids” she calls them – “who live in a world where grown-up often carelessly violate the contracts they have made with them. ... But in her stories she shows counter forces at work, such as individuals who treat children with respect, children who see through the hypocrisy around them, ... take responsibility for themselves and their world” (1-2).

Bambara’s first volume was effervescent and full of hope, but *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* does not hold such joy, for it poses harder questions to answer. Susan Willis has discussed the differences between the two collections:

These stories (*The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*) develop the integral relationship between the revolutionary leader and the community. Significantly, the family, which functioned in *Gorilla, My Love* as the displaced representation of the black community, is abandoned – often thrown into question – while the notion of a collectivity expands into the community at large: the revolutionary band, the neighborhood, or small town. (149)


... Bambara was a very contemporary writer. She believed in the simultaneity of art and politics, and understood the value of what she wrote in service to the black community. Hence, community activists, cultural workers, and social workers figure prominently in all of her fiction. There is a strong undercurrent of mutual love and respect in the black community in Bambara’s world: Children can talk to strangers without fear of harm, older black women are grandmothers to everyone, and men and women are spiritual healers who assist the people in their recovery from dealing with racism and economic exploitation. All of this and more is contained in the stories, essays, and interviews in this (*Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*) latest collection. (170)
To conclude with the words of Billye Raushanah Smith: “Bambara’s early works, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1982) are very nationalist and strident in tone with the Black community, and specifically Black women at the center. Outside communities or outside threat is not fully described and instead the stories concentrate on illustrating unification and community as a form of protection from outside threat as opposed to legitimizing the enemy by talking about them” (120).

1.33.1 *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*; *Fiction, Essays and Conversations*:

On December 9, 1995, Toni Cade Bambara died of colon cancer at the age of 56. Some of her last works which were yet to be published were gathered by her daughter, Karma and her life long friend and editor, Toni Morrison. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* was edited and published by Morrison in 1996. The anthology includes many selections which have never before appeared in print. The compilation of six stories, five essays, and an interview with the author showcases Bambara’s extraordinary range as a writer, film critic, activist, and cultural worker. Morrison’s “Preface” is an added bonus to this collection. She explains her long relationship with Bambara as her editor at Random House and what she sees as most valuable about all of Bambara’s writings. It is a moving tribute from one black woman writer to another, and it is clear that the two had developed a close friendship based in part on a shared respect for and understanding of the vibrancy of African-American story-telling. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* extends the life of Toni Cade Bambara. It confirms that we already know about her artistry and inform us on personal and political matters that allow us to better understand what she saw as her mission (70).

There are three sections in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* – *Fiction, Essays and Conversations*. The first section is “Fiction”, consisting of six short stories, such as “Going Critical”, “Madame Bai And the Taking of Stone Mountain”, “Baby’s Breath”, “The War of the Wall”, “Ice”, and “Luther On Sweet Auburn.” Bambara’s fiction is incisive and satisfying. “Going Critical” examines the relationship between Clara, a woman dying
from radiation poisoning and Honey, her spiritually gifted daughter whom Clara hopes will carry on her mission as a community advocate. All of the stories in the collection are about relationships, responsibility, and community. The second section contains five essays – Spike Lee’s “School Daze” Julie Dash’s “Daughters of the Dust”, “Language and the Writer”, “Deep Sight and Rescue Missions”, “The Education of Story-teller”. Bambara’s expertise and passion for filmmaking is evident throughout the book but especially in two essays. In “Reading the Signs, Empowering the eye”, Bambara explores the black independent film movement with a meticulous analysis of Julie Dash’s 1992 lyric masterpiece DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST. “School Daze” is an insightful appraisal of the complex themes, meanings, and implications of Spike Lee’s film about class, caste, culture, and intracommunity dynamics at a southern black village.

In the essay, “Deep Sight and Rescue Missions” Bambara takes the reader on a journey through downtown Philadelphia. Along the way, she examines the independent media movement as well as issues vital to people of colour, including assimilation, accommodation, opportunism, and resistance.

The last section is Louis Masiah’s interview with Toni Cade Bambara–“How She Came By Her Name.” The interview offers insights into Bambara’s battle with cancer and into her development as a writer and activist.

In DEEP SIGHTINGS AND RESCUE MISSIONS, Bambara’s prose is poetic and often confrontational, reflecting her honesty, passion, and commitment to issues of race, gender, and community.


Some of the stories in the fiction section of Deep Sight and Rescue Missions first appeared in print in the early 1980 in Essence magazine (“Baby’s Breath”), First World (“Luther On Sweet Auburn”) and Image (“The War of the Wall”). The six stories feature characters who seek self-definition through their relationships with others : in “Going Critical”, a
mother slowly dying from radiation poisoning reflects on her relationship with her daughter during a day at the beach; and two boys are puzzled by the Community’s warm reception of a painter who transforms their favourite landmark and play area in “The War of the Wall.”

When *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* was published in 1996, it received enthusiastic reviews. *The Miami Herald, The New York Times,* and *The Washington Post,* a few of the many leading newspapers, lavishly praised *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions.* The following commendatory statements are found in the blurb of *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions.* *The Miami Herald* writes: ‘Bambara’s passion and concern for her people permeates *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions ....* So strongly does the book convey Bambara’s fiercely loving spirit that even those just making her acquaintance will feel the pain of her loss.” *The New York Times* compared her to Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. And now the posthumous collection of stories, essays and interviews offers lasting evidence of Bambara’s passion, lyricism and tough critical intelligence. Here are stories of mothers and daughters, rebels and peeresses of entire communities struggling to survive outside the American mainstream. Here are reflections on culture and politics, literature and film, on the difficulties and necessity of forging an identity as a writer, activist and black woman. Beautifully wrought, radiant with thought and feeling, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* is a testament to literature’s capacity to change lives – and to its author’s powers of conscience and creation. *The Washington Post* remarks “A major African American writer and a peerless architect of the short story.”

Alice A. Deck reviews *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*: “*Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* confirms what we already know about (Bambara’s) artistry and informs us on personal and political matters that allow us to better understand what she saw as her mission” (170). Smith takes into account all the six stories of Bambara and remarks:

The stories in *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,* products of the final segment of Toni Cade Bambara’s life, were assembled and edited by Toni Morrison. Many of the stories form conversation with stories and
topics that she had initiated in other volumes. Many themes reoccur, such as the need to bridge the schism between the political and spiritual, the detrimental effects of environmental racism, the tender man, broken covenants with children, and tensions within the role of the Community Organizer. (120)

Toni Morrison shares double responsibility, for its editing and publishing and writing a “Preface”. Morrison writes in the ‘Preface’ : Bambara is a writer’s writer, an editor’s writer, a reader’s writer. Gently but pointedly she encourages us to rethink art and public space in “The War of the Wall”. She is all “eyes, sweetness and stingers” in “Luther On Sweet auburn” and in “Baby’s Breath”. She is wisdom’s clarity in “Going Critical”, plumbing the ultimate separation for meaning as legacy.

Although her insights are multiple, her textures layered and her narrative trajectory implacable, nothing distracts from the sheer satisfaction her story-telling provides. ... In “Ice”, for example, watching her effortlessly transform a story about responsibility into the responsibility of story-telling is pure delight and we get to be in warm and splendid company all along the way. (VIII-IX)

1.33.2 “Going Critical”:

“Going Critical’ is an opening story of the “fiction” section. A close reading of the story reminds us what Bambara said in 1993. In 1993 she got the disappointing news that she had colon cancer. She said that the diagnosis did not surprise her : “For several years I had been stuck-spiritually, financially, psychically and physically. Finally, my intestines were blocked. I knew I had been blocked because I could not feel my spirit guides around me ...” (239). “Going Critical” contains such inmost feelings of Clara who sadly expresses about her cancer. Bambara in her “A Sort of Preface” to Gorilla, My Love, warns against reading as autobiographical.

The story opens with the negotiation of mother-daughter reflecting upon mother’s death. Clara, despite her daughter’s unwillingness, is organizing for the end of her life, and trying to communicate a type of living
will. Above all she wants her daughter who has spiritual healing powers to use them properly and warns her against those who abuse their gifts for money and have no principles.

Clara is dying of cancer that she contracted at the Army’s nuclear testing facility, which put the service people in danger and contaminated the earth and Clara’s body. Clara remembers the bomb testing, where the government did not provide safety gear or adequate information and hides information about potential damages from its employees. She, along with other army members, files a legal suit that she feels confident they will win. Honey, Clara’s daughter, works at a Community Center, known as Khufu which has a healing unit.

Clara’s second wish is that the money from the lawsuit go to the Community Center not to Honey’s bourgeois, money grubbing in-laws. Emotionally Honey is unwilling to let mother go. She is resentful of her mother’s impending death. Clara maintains that she will be able to train Honey after her death. Clara says there is work that she can only do from the other side. Clara refuses to be victimized by the cancer, saying that it is indicative of a new age, new beginning, a few cells trying to start up again. One is tempted to read this as Bambara’s coming to terms with her own terminal cancer, primarily because of Clara’s visionary optimism:

“They say, Honey, that cancer is the disease of new beginning, the result of a few cells trying to start things up again” – and her appeal to Honey that “... you say the words over me, hear? No high-falutin eulogies, OK? Don’t let them lie me into the past tense and try to palm me off on God as somebody I’m not, OK?... Cause I’m not at all unhappy.... I’ve still my work to do, whatever shape I’m in. I mean whatever form I’m in, you know? (21)

“Going Critical” also gives tribute to the metaphysical potential of music. Clara leaves her body during an especially moving rendition of the star spangles banner. Fireworks become a metaphor for the next life. Clara describes them as the pulses of energy marking the comings and going of innumerable souls. She begins to pass on to the next life. Clara feels her
flesh falling away, she becomes like a point of light, a point of consciousness in the dark, she begins to leave her body to be one with the universe, but her daughter draws her back, not ready to let her go.

Clara, like the French word clair, or clear, is most like Velma from *The Salt Eaters*, who has come to awareness of her powers, becoming clear but has been affected by her work with Transchemical.

1.33.3 The next story is “Madame Bai And the Taking of Stone Mountain.” The story focuses on bridging spiritual-political schism. In ‘Going Critical”, Clara tries to imbibe and inculcate her daughter, Honey, the importance of spiritual dimensions of healing. This is more elaborated in the novel *The Salt Eaters* in the process of Velma’s break down and healing as well as in the unresolved political tension within the Black Community.

Madame Bai, a Korean maritail arts and spiritual arts teacher, is invited to begin a studio school. The students who are under the protagonist, joined the school of Madame Bai. The narrator, however, studies with Madame Bai and discovers a way of blending the political with the spiritual that makes her a better organizer.

After joining Madame Bai’s class she learns body-mind-spirit connection. This connects to her political work because it makes her a better searcher as a part of the citizen search team for the murdered children. She learns to “be still” to “silence the chatter” to be aware of intuition” (40). This in turn makes her a better Organizer “she appoints herself town crier, alarm clock … of the neighbourhood who continue to monitor the Klan, organize, analyse, agitate, and keep watch over the children” (40).

“Madame Bai and the Taking of Stone Mountain” demonstrates the way in which great spiritual awareness can enhance activism. The protagonist of “Madame Bai” admits that with the decrease in internal chatter she is able to be a better activist.

Madame Bai is eager to know about “the Stone Mountain.” Madame Bai asks the narrator “What is the Stone Mountain for?” She refers to the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Carving, which depicts three
Confederate heroes of the Civil War: Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. The protagonist’s political consciousness screams out that Stone Mountain is for imperialism. She is disappointed because she thinks her Korean teacher wants a history lesson. Madame Bai, however, gives her a wholly different answer than she expected, “Stone Mountain” is for taking” (44). Madame Bai’s answer combines both the spiritual and the political. Politically the answer connotes that the power of the elites is for taking through struggle. This is represented in the Confederate memorial, which was begun in 1916 and was completed only in 1962, perhaps as backlash to the Civil rights and Black Power Movement. Spiritually, the only way a stone mountain, which is by nature solid still and non-responsive. This involves the Buddhist theory of doing, through non-doing of overcoming a fear not through trying to change the problem but through changing one’s reaction to it. Madame Bai’s answer reflects Velma’s conclusion in The Salt Eaters, that political challenges cannot be overcome by internalizing anger and grief, instead one must be still and connected to inner resources in order to be of use to both self and community.

1.33.4 “Baby’s Breath”:

Like in “The Johnson Girls” (Gorilla, My Love) and “A Tender Man” (The Sea Birds Are Still Alive), Bambara once again concentrates on a tender man, that is Louis. In “The Johnson Girls”, she discusses at length the types of men and their relative strengths and weaknesses. The women divide these men into several categories – “handy man”, “fucking man”, “go-round man”, “gopher man’, ‘money man” and the ‘tender man” (168). The stories like “The Johnson Girls”, and “A Tender Man” focus on the latter type of man. Louis, the tender man of the story ‘Baby’s Breath” is by profession a jazz musician. The story opens with the description of women who came in the life of Louis and they destroy his peace of mind. Louis and his mother desire for kids. But these women prefer abortion to motherhood. With the first abortion, the woman felt she was too young to have a baby and come from a pretentions family who thought she was too good for him. The second
abortion was with a married woman who wanted to go back to her husband. The third abortion was from a woman who suffered toxemia, having poisoned the baby with junk food and alcohol. Like Louis, Obie in *The Salt Eaters* faces the same problem. That is, Obie’s partners also aborted children that he wanted. Obie recounts: “And they’d loved him, at least they each said they did. But they kept killing his babies. Junk food addicts, toxemic pregnancies, miscarriages. Excited mothers to be, suddenly sullen and unreachable, terror-stricken abortions” (99).

In “Baby’s Breath” there is a nearly identical sentiment: “And Norma had said she wanted the baby. Her enthusiasm waned, though .... By the second month, she’d grown unreachable and sullen” (48). Louis later describes the non-receptive nature of his partners using sex as a metaphor. “He would come to her with the light on and see her openly glistening, wet. But inside she was dry and no longer closed lovingly around him. Would clench her muscles too soon, too tight, and push him out” (48). This sentiment is reflective of Norma, Louis’s girlfriend, who indeed seems broken, having lied about the abortion, calling it a miscarriage, dismissing the act because “The Easter outfit her parents had sent would fit now” (49). Louis is a tender man, Le desires his child and is ready to support it. With Norma he is alone in planning wedding arrangements, natural birth classes, and setting up housekeeping while she had grown detached.

Louis and Obie are the good boys in the family; both having brothers in jail. Obie’s brother Roland is in prison on Rikers Island for raping a forty-six year old woman. Louis is always compared to his brother who steals bikes, breaks windows, and brings the police to the house at all hours of the night. However, when Louis laments the latest abortion, to his mother she holds him accountable for not being responsible in a tone she usually reserves for his “no-good father”. She is angry at his romanticism because he is not investing in his music, “knocking up” women and coating it with romantic crap, with nothing to offer them” (55-56). Commenting on Bambara’s tender man, Smith observes:
Like most of Bambara’s work, the tender man does not go without criticism. Louis’ mother does not allow the reader to pity him for too long by pointing out his shortcomings. She equates his tenderness with weakness. Obie, with his mistress and the narcissistic “Brotherhood” is also not without weaknesses, and the tender man, from “The Johnson girls” is more of an ideal than a reality. (60)

1.33.5 “The War of the Wall”:

The theme of the conflict between the organizer and the community is seen in most of the stories like “Broken Field Running”, “Playing with Punjab”, “Apprentice”, “The Lesson”. “The War of the Wall” further problemizes the issues of personal sacrifice for the greater common good by expressing a conflicted insider-outsider relationship between the organizer and the community.

Like the organizer in “The Lesson” who has nappy hair and does not wear makeup the protagonist of “The War of the Wall” is a Black “hippy lady” who has come to do a mural on one of the city’s public walls. The local girls feel that their space has been violated by an outsider. The girls try everything to get the woman to stop the mural; they confront her, and they try to get their parents to intervene by insinuating and instigating. According to the girls the wall belongs to their community and the “hippy lady” does not. The wall is a part of their intimate space, and community narrative, which involves handball games and Mrs. Morrison’s son being arrested against that wall.

The “artist lady” never mixes with the community. She is anti-social. She does not greet the people. She outright ignores them. To make matter worse she rejects the admiration of the local lothario and rejects people’s food. She prefers to eat the vegetarian food as her “spiritual teacher recommends” (62). The young girls plan to deface the wall and locate a can of spray paint for the job. At the story’s climax the girls prepare to attack the wall with their spray paint and meet the whole community which has come together to celebrate a breath taking mural that stuns them all.
This story is in conversation with stories such as “The Apprentice” and “Broken Field Running”, where the Community organizers are a seamless part of the community. The “artist lady” is more alien to the Community than even the tireless White organizer in “Playing With Punjab”, who alienates her biggest fan despite her good intentions and less welcomed than the tiresome Black woman in “The Lesson”, who at least receives the parents’ approval. “The War of the Wall” introduces the Black educated, new-age, organizer, who is well meaning and hopelessly eccentric. She is at odds with the ‘down” organizers from several of Bambara’s other stories, who are an integral part of the Communities they work in and embody the Community’s signifiers such as language and dress. The artist, however, gives a priceless gift to the Community through her art despite her awkwardness. By placing another type of relationship on the continuum of organizer-community interactions, Bambara is encouraging contributing to the Community in a form that uses a person’s strengths. This stance represents a shift in Bambara’s perspective. Stories such as “Playing With Punjab”, “The Apprentice”, “The Organizer’s Wife”, and “Broken Field Running”, portray grassroots organizing as the only appropriate form of resistance.

1.33.6 “Ice”:

In her interview with Tate, Bambara speaks explicitly about the responsibility of writers, artists, and cultural workers. To quote her:

It is a tremendous responsibility – responsibility and honour – to be a writer, an artist, a cultural worker.... One’s got to see what the factory workers sees, what the prisoner sees, what the welfare children see, what the scholar sees, got to see what the ruling class mythmakers see as well, in order to tell the truth and not get trapped. (18)

There are a number of stories, such as “Gorilla, My Love”, “Happy Birthday”, “A Girl’s Story”, “Basement” to name a few, that grapple with the theme of responsibility. “Ice” is not an exception. Toni Morrison, in her “preface” to Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions, points out “In “Ice” ... watching her effortlessly transform a story about responsibility into the responsibility of story telling is pure delight ...” (ix).
The theme of responsibility is illustrated through the two young girls who are busy in protecting the abandoned litter of puppies from the winter weather. The girls go door-to-door to take up a collection to build the puppies a house. They are successful. But despite their efforts the puppies freeze to death, which for the children is primarily due to the adults’ neglect. In addition to the theme of responsibility, Bambara also interwove into her narrative the role of an activist in the society.

The main character’s parents do not have enough money to heat the house through the winter and burn her doll house to keep the house warm. In the past the children had taken up a collection to send a neighbour to the hospital when the ambulance would not take her without money. After the puppies die the main character goes door to door holding the adults in the neighbourhood accountable for their neglect and they mumble grown up nonsense and cannot look her in the eye. Their inability to look her in the eye demonstrates their acceptance of her ability to hold them accountable. The narrator explains that the grown ups are home all day because the hospital workers are on strike and the people who work at the bottling plant are laid off. So they have no excuse for not having kept an eye on the puppies.

Bambara speaks of her immense respect for children’s intelligence and resourcefulness.

1.33.7 “Luther on Sweet Auburn”:

“Luther on Sweet Auburn” is the concluding story from *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*. While speaking on the short story genre, Bambara observes: “To my mind, the six-page short story is the gem. If it takes more than six pages to say it, something is the matter” (7). “Luther On Sweet Auburn” runs into six pages and the hallmark of the story is the unity of impression. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see “Luther On Sweet Auburn”.

In “Luther On Sweet Auburn”, Bambara explores the tension between Organizer and Community. The narrator, a former Community Organizer, turned playwright, Luther, one of her former coworkers and clients, thinks
that she is still a youth worker. Luther wants her help for meeting his basic needs. He tells his long tale about babies, reform school, drugs, and jail. She, however, has moved on. Prior to their encounter she had left a political meeting and is rushing to rehearse her new play, an activist theatre production about hostage keeping.

The narrator discloses her history with the Community. Having received a position as a Community worker, she hired Luther, a gang-affiliated graffiti artist in the area, as an art instructor, despite the disapproval of the Community Center’s Director.

This new Luther no longer does art. The narrator describes Luther as having a dependency complex, “Luther, who’s all about need and you gotta help me” (84). He is stunned that she no longer does social work and presses the narrator to help him anyway. He is accustomed to relying on Black women who fill roles in his life such as “Big Sister, Little mama, Always there” (84), to depend on, lean on, take care of his problems. The narrator holds him accountable for helping himself. She asks him how old he is; questions his dependency, and inform him she is only five years older than him. He is surprised because he always assumed the age gap was larger because she took care of him. She asks how did the 1960s pass him by, since he was in such close proximity to CORE with its values of self-determination.

In this story the organizer, who was originally attracted to men like Luther has become radicalized. Though she politely listens, she refuses to solve Luther’s problems for him and also holds him accountable, asking him how he did not get involved politically and questions some of the self-sabotaging techniques that get in the way of his liberation. She, however, ignores several issues such as the possibility that Luther may have lacked a parent with political conscious like her own or the push or funding needed for higher education.

1.34 *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*:

Toni Cade Bambara has never tried to cloak her investment in the Black Community. In 1971 Bambara edited her second anthology entitled
Tales and Stories for Black Folks. She dedicated Tales and Stories for Black Folks to “The Family at Home, The Family at Livingston, The Family at Large, and especially to our Young” (7). As the dedication suggests these stories revolve around establishing collective responsibility. The book is a compilation of stories for young people, emphasizing the oral tradition, unveiling the sources of oppression, celebrating our unique traits, and identifying sources of strength. In her introduction, ‘Our Great Kitchen Tradition’, she roots the story, as a literary form, in the oral tradition that is integrally tied to truth telling. She writes that a story is something that is passed down from elders and consists of family tales such as “how Granddaddy Johnson used to ride the Baltimore and Ohio and get into more trouble ... cause he just wouldn’t say ‘Sir’ to no man” (11). She goes on to look at the difference in the way slavery is presented in books as slaves loving their captivity and captors versus the truth of resistance, both covert and overt. She ends her introduction, acknowledging the importance of reading but emphasizing the importance of the oral tradition and listening to elders “for they are truth” (12). This introduction paves the way for the rest of the book which will not be another set of half-truths, like the aforementioned books on the Black experience, but that will tap into the Black oral tradition and continue in these customs of truth telling. The first half of the book includes stories such as Bambara’s own “Raymond’s Run”, Langston Hughes’s “Thank You M’am”, Alice Walker’s “To Hell with Dying”, and Ernest Gaine’s “The Sky is Gray”, Vanessa Howard’s “Let me Hang Loose”. The second half of the book consists of folk tales, many of which such as “The Three Little Panthers”, “The Three Little Brothers”, and “The True Story of Chicken Licken” are culturally affirming retellings of the European tales in Black English, illuminating oppression and instigating on unification and struggle.

The parables in Tales and Stories for Black Folks are folk tales adapted from the original form by students in Bambara's writing class at Livingston College in New Jersey. The stories emphasize the social and political reality of urban Black young people who use Black English, participate in social
movements, live in the ghetto and whose main enemy is ‘the man, the police, or the banker. The stories emphasize deploying critical consciousness and unity in order to solve problems.

There are stories of political message, and there are stories which avoid making political statements. “The Collection”, says Deck, “offers a balance between readings which are entertaining and those which are didactic” (16).


Bambara’s fable “The Toad and the Donkey” parallels Aesop’s “The Tortoise and the Hare”, but Bambara’s version states that as result of having lost the race to the slower Toad, the donkey decided that he would never run a race again and “donkeys have been kind of stubborn about running ever since” (137). The obvious difference between “The Three Little Panthers” and “The Toad and the Donkey” is that the latter does not contain a political message. It can be read for entertainment and as the type of folktale intended to explain the reasons why humans and animals behave as they do.

“The Three Little Panthers” is a collaboration work. Bambara teamed with Geneva Powell, a black community worker from Newark, New Jersey, to write “The Three Little Panthers”. The story concerns three urban panthers who, having been sent on a survival missing in “the forest called the suburbs” (140), were continually harassed by antagonistic locals such as a rat, a vulture, a rabbit, an ostrich, an owl, and a fox. Refusing to conform to a suburban life-style, the only way they could have peacefully resided there, the panthers chose to return to their own neighbourhood where they could work to sustain their own culture. The story also obliquely criticizes those blacks who chose to be assimilated in order to live in American suburbs. Bambara and Powell imply that inner-city experience and environment are potentially more fulfilling for blacks.
1.35 Conclusion:

The short stories and novels have received the most critical attention of the critics. The analysis of these stories reveals certain common traits. Her interviews with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Kay Bonetti, Deborah Jackson, Claudia Tate and Louis Massiah reflect on Bambara’s views on certain aspects of the short story, such as theme, characterization, plot, point of view, use of language, use of symbolism, use of technique etc. In addition to these, Bambara has her own creed of writing short stories.

Bambara herself was an intriguing commentator on her short stories. Writing in short fiction was an affirmation, both of her affinity for the form and of the necessity that she be able to combine writing with activism. Bambara believed that her task was “to produce stories that save our lives” (1). The short story form suited to her temperament, Bambara commented, because it “makes a modest appeal for attention, slips up on your blind side and wrassles you to the mat before you know what’s grabbed you” (164). Bambara’s contributions to the contemporary short story include experimentation in oral/ literary and aesthetic/ didactic narrative blends, in playful, anecdotal structures, in verb sense (especially the present tense) and in portrayals of epiphanies and/or threshold moments of individuals and communities.

In addition to writing many stories and novels, Bambara was a civil rights activist, teacher, and editor. She lived in Harlem for the first ten years of her life, and her fiction reflects her intimate knowledge of city spaces. She also travelled extensively in adulthood, making trips to Cuba and Vietnam and a move to Atlanta. Bambara was committed to using her skills as a writer not only to entertain, but also to educate and contribute to social and political movements. When not writing, she was fervently devoted to activism in other forms. Early in her life she worked “in the trenches” to help minority city dwellers and late in her life she made activist film, including a television documentary that spotlighted police brutality. In the 1970s and 1980s, she was also involved in the women’s and black liberation movements. In both her fiction and her personal life, Bambara refused to give up the fight, and she
continued to work after a cancer diagnosis until her death. She was the epitome of the “liberated woman” – an educated, socially dedicated, creative individual who in every way used the personal to political effect.

In respect of her subject matter, it is to be noted that Bambara was very aware of the black environment and of black female experiences. Critics have praised Bambara’s compassionate portrayal of the African-American community, a community in which Hazel Parker takes the centre stage and speaks with her own voice. Throughout her career, Bambara used her writings to convey social and political messages about the welfare of the African-American community and of African-American women especially. Bambara had an objective goal to describe the urban black community without using any stereotypes, while having a deep understanding of the complications in the Afro-American life. In her essay, “What It Is I Think I’m Doing Any how”, Bambara says, “Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that urges that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary” (10).

The most outstanding feature of her stories is the portrayal of characters. One of Bambara’s special gifts as a writer of fiction is her ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view. In the fifteen stories that compose Gorilla, My Love, all the main characters are female, either teenagers or children. They are wonderful creations, especially the young ones, many of whom show similar traits of character; they are intelligent, imaginative, sensitive, proud, arrogant, witty, tough, but also poignantly vulnerable. Through these young central characters, Bambara expresses the fragility, the pain, and occasionally the promise of the experience of growing up, of coming to terms with a world that is hostile chaotic, violent. Disillusionment, loss, and loneliness, as well as unselfishness, love, and endurance, are elements of that process of maturation which her young protagonists undergo.
Hazel is one of the immortal creations of Bambara. Tate in her interview with Bambara asks Bambara the particular reason for the choice of the name Hazel. Bambara answered:

The first time I heard those sounds, “hay zil”, my mother was stretching out on the couch, putting witch hazel pads on her eyes, and I thought, “Hmmm, witch hazel.” I was fond of witches, still am, the groovy kind. I once had a belt made out of shellacked hazel nuts. It’s a powerful word, “hazel”, a seven, and the glyph we call ‘zee” is ancient and powerful. The critic – I should say aesthetic theorist or something fancy to suit her style – Eleanor Traylor calls me “Miss Hazel” and maintains that the Miss Hazel we meet in the story “My Man Bovanne” is the central consciousness in the whole Bambara Canon. Ahem! (33)

The young girls and women in her stories are fighters and survivors. Lacy is what Bambara would call a ‘warrior’ because the women in her stories are fighters and survivors. Bambara understands and believes in surviving because she grew up listening to stories about “harriet Tubman, Ida Wells, and mother, Anne, and so the women in her stories not only survive, they inspire. In Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, the individual characters are sharply defined. “Raymond’s Run”, “Gorilla, My Love” – the evocation of the individual is the strongest. These stories are narrated in the first person from the point of view of Hazel, Bambara’s spunky child personality. These stories define a resourceful, witty and courageous young girl, similar to the strong young girls we find in Morrison’s first novels: Claudia from The Bluest Eye, and Sula. In their portrayals of preadolescent girls, drawn from their own childhoods, black women writers like Bambara, Morrison, and Marshall have fashioned a highly perceptive means for exposing the contradictions of capitalist society, which is cast as the discontinuity between the child’s perception of the choices made by adults in a given situation and the child’s own critical apprehension of the situation.

Use of symbolism is another remarkable feature of her stories. Symbols are often used in stories to portray more of a literary meaning.
Conventional, literary, and allegory are examples of the different kinds of symbolism. Various symbols and strong images are used in the stories. The researcher cannot make a comprehensive study of all these symbols for want of space. One good example of “Gorilla, My Love” is enough to illustrate the use of symbolism in his stories. The title of the story is symbolic. The words “Gorilla”, and “Love” have been interpreted variously by the critics. In her interview with Bambara, Tate asks Bambara the particular reason for the choice of the title. Bambara answered:

As for gorilla – the term has always been one of endearment. It comes up in “Raymond’s Run” (Gorilla, My Love) and in “Medley” (Sea Birds) in different ways. In “Medley” it signals macho, but the charge is made with affection. While I was typing up ‘Raymond’s Run” to send out years ago, I noticed I had the boy shaking the fence like a gorilla; and I though, “Oh, my God, Cade! What the hell are you doing? How pro-racist!” I kept juggling that passage around. I felt uncomfortable with it but ran with it always. People get on my case about it – “What kind of thing is that to say about a young Blood?” – shades of King Kong and the nigger-as-ape and all. What kind of thing, indeed? They’re right. I was wrong. I’ve some nerve expecting my personal idiolects to cancel out, supersede, or override the whole network of racist name-calling triggered by that term. (33)

Various symbols and strong images are used in “The Lesson” to represent the social and economic inequality faced by the children in this story.

Last but not the least is the use of English language. In her revealing essay called “Black English” (1972) Bambara explains the political reasons for her interest in the language of African-Americans especially as it is used informally, on the street. “To resist acculturation, you hang on to language, because it is the reflection of a people, of a core of ideas and beliefs and values and literature and lore” (2). In her short stories, Bambara introduces an entire population men, women, and children, all engaged in Playing the Dozens and other forms of word play. Some use the strategy to entertain, and some use it to teach, and all enjoy themselves.
What Twain’s narrator Huck Finn did for the dialect of middle America in the mid-nineteenth century, Bambara’s narrators do for contemporary black dialect. Indeed, in the words of one reviewer, Caren Dybek, Bambara “possesses one of the finest ears for the nuances of Black English” (66). Anne Tyler, in her article “At the Still Centre of a Dream” observes: “As in Gorilla, My Love and The Sea Birds Are Still Alive ... what pulls us along is the language of its characters, which is startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note. Everything these people say, you feel, ordinary, real life. People are saying right now on any street corner. It’s only that the rest of us did not realize it was sheer poetry they were speaking”(1-2).

Three of Bambara’s stories – “Gorilla, My Love”, “Medley”, and “Witchbird” – have been adapted to film. Stories such as “Gorilla, My Love”, and “Raymond’s Run” are among Bambara’s most often anthologized works. To conclude with the words of Lucille Clifton: “She has captured it all, how we really talk, how we really are” (1).
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